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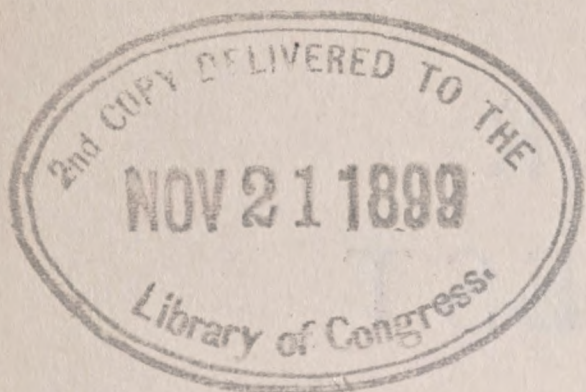
EDITH HENRIETTA FOWLER

AUTHOR OF THE YOUNG PRETENDERS,
THE PROFESSOR'S CHILDREN, ETC.

"The Lord's my Shepherd, I'll not want ;
He makes me down to lie
In pastures green ; He leadeth me
The quiet waters by."



NEW YORK
D. APPLETON AND COMPANY
1899



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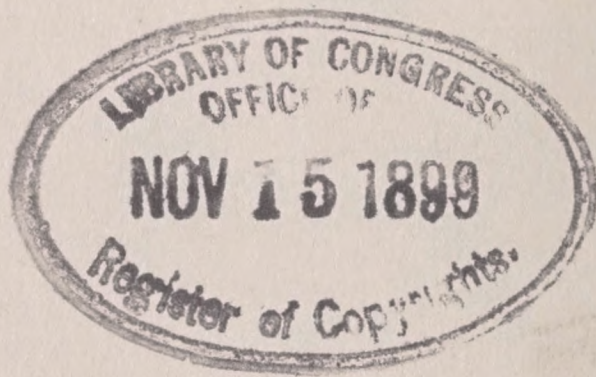
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TO
THE MEMORY
OF LAST YEAR

I DEDICATE
THIS BOOK.

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A CORNER OF THE WEST

CHAPTER I

PETRONEL

SHE made a perfect picture in the sunny garden, and a quaint, old-fashioned picture, too, as she wandered up and down the flower-lined paths on some mysterious business of her own connected with a leaking watering-can and the broken doll which was propped up against the sun-dial. The artist, who had come all the way from London to paint the child's portrait, stood still and smiled. The little brown shoes and stockings, the crumpled holland pinafore and big sun-bonnet were just what he would have dressed her in himself; and the sweet flower face, with its sky-blue eyes, seemed to be hiding itself within white calico petals from the too-inquisitive gaze of any outsiders.

"Isn't she a perfect darling?" said her mother enthusiastically; and then she ran across the grass to where Petronel was playing, and the artist frowned, for a Redfern gown completely spoiled his picture.

"Come and speak to this gentleman who is

going to draw and paint you," said Lady Merrivale persuasively.

"I don't want to be drawn and painted," answered her little daughter gravely.

"But, darling, think what a pretty picture you will make, and it shall be hung in the drawing-room! She is really pretty, isn't she?" turning to the artist. "She has been so clever, you know, in having my eyes and mouth, and her father's nose and curly hair."

"I haven't, Mummy, truly," interrupted Petronel; "I have only got my own mouth and eyes and things."

The grown-ups laughed.

"She is the strangest child, too," her mother explained, "with such dreadfully solemn thoughts, and awfully interested in religion, and queer things like that. And though she looks such a baby she is really seven years old. I do hope being so small for her age won't mean she will grow up short and stumpy. That would be such a misfortune."

"I suppose she understands everything that is said?" asked George Lumsden, who was very fond of children.

"Oh, yes. I should think so! I never thought about it. It doesn't matter. How will you paint her, indoors or out?"

"Oh, out-of-doors!" exclaimed the artist; "it is a shame to waste any of Devonshire indoors."

"I always find Devonshire dreadfully depressing," continued Lady Merrivale; "it is so dead-

alive, and I get so tired of the country and that tiresome sound of the sea. And the lanes here are simply awful. You really have to wear hideous, thick boots, or else drive everywhere. Petronel!" she called, as the child walked away from them, "where are you going?"

"To the wood, Mummy. I'm very busy."

"What will you do now, Mr. Lumsden? I am so sorry there is nobody for you to play with, and nothing to play at. That is what makes the spring such a stupid time of year. There is nothing for men to do. The shooting is all over, and the hunting hardly lasts long enough, and there is no cricket, and London is emptied for Easter, and altogether it is horrid. My husband had to go to Exeter on some stupid business, which I know would have done itself much better without him, only he will fuss so about things down here. Landlords at home are rather fussy people, don't you think?"

The artist smiled, and her ladyship rattled on.

"I am counting the days for the Easter recess to be over so that we can go back to town. I can't think why Parliament will keep on giving holidays, as if the members worked hard enough to want any. Bob says they do; but I know he does not. He never does anything at the House but write letters and smoke and go to sleep. And here we are wasting a whole splendid piece of April, and even a week of May, in this out-of-the-way place. But I quite forgot, what are you going to play at to-day?"

"I will play with Petronel," said George; "but

you forget that I have come here to work rather than to play. I have my picture to paint."

"Oh! so you have. It will be dreadfully dull for you staying on down here after we have gone back. I am so sorry for you."

"You need not be. I have been working hard in London all the winter, and it will be a fine thing for me having this time in the country, and such a country, Lady Merrivale!"

"It is so tiresome of Dr. Cary not to let me take the children up to town with me. I like having Petronel downstairs after tea, and I wanted to show lots of my friends the baby."

"London is not very nice for children."

"I suppose not. But I can't see why. Our house overlooks the Park."

"Still the Park is not Devonshire."

"No, thank goodness!" exclaimed Lady Merrivale fervently.

"And Jim Cary is an old friend of mine," continued George; "I shall be glad to see something of him again."

"He has behaved like a perfect goose in getting engaged to Lavinia Garland; but I knew how it would be when I found he had come to be old Dr. Garland's partner."

"I had not heard of this," said George, much interested. "What is the girl like?"

"Not much like a girl at all, I can tell you. Not that she is much more than thirty, but she has the primmest, most old-maidish ways I ever saw."

“What made him become engaged to her?”

“Because they had neither of them anything else to do, of course. And she has rather pretty blue eyes. But the thought of a man with Jim Cary’s physique, and belonging to such a good old sea-faring family as the Carys, settling down in Barnscombe as a village doctor, and married to Lavinia Garland, makes me positively ill.”

“Is he in love with her?” George asked, as he opened the gate which led into Petronel’s wood.

“Not he—and it’s all rubbish if he says he is! The fact is,” continued Lady Merrivale, waxing confidential, “that Lavinia fell frightfully in love with him, and I suppose he liked it—men generally do—and then the people in the village talked, and I expect that old termagant, Mrs. Garland, had a finger in the pie; anyhow they drifted into an engagement, a folly which would never have happened if Jim had gone to sea as all his fathers did before him.”

“Why didn’t he?”

“Because he was another goose,” answered her ladyship decisively. “Do look at Petronel. Isn’t she too sweet?”

The child stood in the sloping wood with her pinafore full of the bluebells she had gathered. Bright sunshine flecked the grass all round her, and the colour of the wild hyacinths lay like blue smoke all down the hillside. Up between the trees the blue sky showed deep and clear, and far away in glimpses here and there lay the blue sea. But

Petronel's eyes were the purest bit of blue even in that landscape.

"Here is my picture," said George quietly, "only I can never half do justice to it."

"That frock is rather old," her mother observed doubtfully; but the artist laughed at the idea of spoiling Petronel with a best frock.

"I must go down to the Rectory now about those bothering decorations," said Lady Merrivale. "You won't mind, will you?"

"I should like to stay and talk to Petronel," George answered, with a smile. "I might even begin my sketch of her. The colouring is so perfect to-day."

"I like my dirty pinney," began the child gravely, "because it is out-of-doors' dirt. Indoors is cleaner, but it is not nice like out-of-doors, is it?"

"Certainly not," answered the artist.

"And I paint pictures, too," Petronel went on confidently.

"Do you know what a picture is?" asked George.

The child looked thoughtful. "A picture is my think with a line drawn round it," she explained.

"Yes, that is it, my child," exclaimed George, with delight at the description. "And, do you know, I think you and I will be great friends."

"I have lots of friends. My doll, and the cowboy, and the clockman, and the stable cat, and my long-clothes baby, and all the lambs, 'specially the

newest ones, and—I can't hardly remember what a lot of friends I have."

"I should like to be one of them."

Petronel looked up with a smile.

"I have taken quite a fancy to you," she said slowly. "I think you have such a nice face and a kind voice."

"I am glad you think so. I think you have a nice face, too."

"Nurse says it is wicked to like your own face."

"Perhaps she is afraid of your becoming vain," suggested the artist.

Petronel looked serious.

"I do think I'm better looking than a frog; but I don't call that vainness," she pleaded sweetly.

And George agreed with her on both points.

"I've been thinking," began Petronel, after a pause, "that I would like you to paint my doll's picture, too. Her name is Gladys Rhubarb, and I'm afraid she might be lonely if she was left out."

"All right. She shall sit on the branch of a tree, and you must watch her so that she doesn't move."

So Petronel's eyes looked up in her portrait, and the doll's likeness was a striking one. It seemed unfortunate that, on the very day it was finished, the paint-brush fell with a splash of green right on to Gladys Rhubarb's face; but, with Petronel's consent, the artist turned the green paint into fresh leaves, and settled to come another time to paint the doll on a canvas all by herself, and without the

life-size figure of Petronel, standing in the foreground with her pinafore full of bluebells, an earnest look on her dear little face, and the colour of heaven in her eyes.

On some of those sweet, spring days when Petronel was tired of standing so still, she and George would go for a walk together down to the sea, and have many interesting talks about kind lions, and pretty crocodiles, and the fairy families who lived in the rock pools. And the artist learned how the pretending people are the really important ones, while fathers and mothers are often ranked with the sideboard and the drawing-room piano, at least in such homes as Petronel's. And he could not imagine how the merry, easy-going squire and his frivolous wife had succeeded in having a little puritan daughter like this, and he wondered who had taught the child her depths of more than childish lore.

"How do you like my long-clothes baby?" she asked him on the day when he had first been introduced to the youthful heir of all the Merrivales.

"It seems a nice little thing," answered George, who was not much of an authority.

"I wanted one so much I prayed for quite a fortnight in my proper prayers. So God sent it, you see."

"It is nice for you to be its little sister."

But Petronel shook her head at such ignorance.

"I am not its sister," she exclaimed; "I am its head-mother, and I do hope I shall grow up into a

good, pretty lady, so that my baby may have a nice mother."

George felt sure she would.

"God only sent one night-gown," she added thoughtfully. "But Mummy can easily buy some more from London, and it was very kind of Him to remember to send one. You know about Him being so kind, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes!" George answered gravely. "No one was ever so kind and good before."

"And so clever," added the child loyally. "I never knew all this till about three weeks ago. Miss Lavinia Garland told me. I do like to know things."

"Did not your mother ever tell you?" George asked, with a feeling of pity deep down out of sight in his masculine heart.

"I don't believe Mummy knows, nor Daddy. 'Sides I expect they'd call me silly. They always do when I'm sad about nice things."

"But why are you sad about nice things?" asked her friend, working hard at his canvas to catch the pathetic, wistful little look.

"I don't know. But nice things like Alice Darnley's wedding, and singing my favourite hymn in church, and being sorry for people I love, all make me sad. At Alice Darnley's wedding I was the saddest person in the church."

"But why, dear child?"

"Because she looked down, and there was so many flowers. I was sad all day till I went to old

Mrs. Cowan's funeral after tea, but I enjoyed that very much. I love Alice. I wish she was my mother."

"Who is Alice Darnley?" George asked absently, so intent was he on his work.

"She dress-made for almost everybody in Barnscombe 'cept Mummy. But now she is too rich, and will live at a splendid farm-house and have cows of her very own."

"Who else are you sorry for?" continued George, who wanted to prolong the sad expression.

"I was for Miss Lavinia when her father died, and she wore a sad black dress. It made me love her so much I always wanted to kiss her. You do want to kiss sad people, you know. I don't now, 'cause her dress is gray. I am frightened when people cry and I go out of the room, but I love them most when they look sad and don't cry."

"The child is an epicure in emotions," George told his friend Jim Cary, with whom he went to smoke his pipe that night.

The doctor's face grew grave.

"Poor little soul! The world's handling will be a bit rough for her, I am afraid. And Lady Merrivale isn't much of a mother."

"Petronel often talks of Miss Garland," continued George. He had thought much of Lady Merrivale's history of Jim's engagement, and he wanted to find out the truth.

"Lavinia is always good to children," answered the doctor simply—so simply that George was a

little disappointed. He had hoped his friend would have ignored the interruption—for when a man loves a woman he usually will not talk about her at all. But Jim Cary continued:

“And children always seem to cling to Lavinia. Even her Sunday-school youngsters are devoted to her, and there is never a birthday party without Lavinia’s being invited. I like a woman to be fond of children. It is one of her most beautiful, natural instincts.”

George raised his eyebrows.

“Lady Merrivale was right,” he thought to himself, and then he changed the subject.

“What made you give up the Navy after all, Jim? You were mad on it as a boy.”

“Both my elder brothers were lost at sea, and my mother could not bear my going after that. It would have killed her, I believe, so I had to give it up.”

“That was a bit rough on a fellow like you!” And George’s voice was full of sympathy.

Jim Cary smiled.

“I am an enthusiastic doctor now, and I was able to give my mother a home for the last five years of her life. Besides I still have the sound of the sea always in my ears.”

“Is that why you stop on down here?”

“Partly. And also because I love Barnscombe, and like to help the quaint, old-world folk whom no one else would take the trouble to look after.”

“But think how much higher you would rise in your profession in London.”

“I am afraid the Carys are not orthodoxly ambitious. I don’t care a rap about making a name—my ancestors fortunately did that for me; but I care tremendously about being able to give my best help to old friends and neighbours who are in need of it. It was simply dreadful in Dr. Garland’s life—his ideas of the art of healing were bounded by a blister and a black draught, and heaps of lives were sacrificed that might have been saved. If I am not in London, you see, there are plenty others who are; but if I were not down here, the people would have to be doctored by the village apothecary.”

And there came into Jim Cary’s face a glow which was not there when he talked of Lavinia.

“And the fees?” queried George.

His friend laughed his big, best laugh.

“You ought to be ashamed of yourself—you an artist, and to talk like that! Go and paint aldermen’s portraits, and advertisements for popular soaps, and modern fashion-plates with the heads of your lady-friends on the top of them, and then you will know more about fees.”

“But, joking apart, do you get anything for your work? I shall be paid even for a picture of Petronel.”

“Oh, yes, I am paid—at least, I suppose I am. But I have plenty without, you know. Have you heard about my cottage hospital here?”

And the doctor launched forth into an eager

description of his work and schemes for the healing of the people of Barnscombe and its wide, outlying districts. And George listened, feeling the charm of his friend's strong personality, and the breath of enthusiasm for ideals, which had from old days made the Carys a fine people, whether on sea or land. But he also decided that this particular Cary—the last representative of that noble race—was more in love with his profession than with anything or anybody else.

One day Petronel decided that she and George should go and call on Miss Garland.

“But would she like me to come too?” he asked.

Petronel looked surprised.

“Miss Lavinia always loves people, and is glad to see them,” she explained. “She even loves people with big noses. Mrs. Garland has a very big nose, but Miss Lavinia loves her.”

“I have rather a big nose, you see,” suggested George.

“Never mind,” said his little friend kindly; “you couldn't help it.”

“But I am afraid you do not like it?” replied George, in mournful tones.

Petronel was such a dear, delicate, little instrument to play upon.

“I do like it,” she hastened to explain, with crimson cheeks; “but I am very glad it isn't any bigger.”

“Yes, I am glad about that, too,” said the artist, with a laugh.

“Miss Lavinia is going to teach me the piano, now the Rectory governess has gone away. I shall like that much better.”

“Why?”

“Because the one I have now is rather cross, you see. She thumps with agony when I play wrong notes.”

“And who will teach you other things now?”

“I’ve learnt all the other things,” said Petronel simply—“all ’cept just finishing how to read.”

George Lumsden was growing very fond of his small model, she had such a sweet face, and such gentle, earnest ways. He thought of her sometimes as grown up into a beautiful woman, and then he was afraid she was too good to grow up at all.

“I am not so clever at sums as Kathleen Fane,” continued the child, “but I am jointier in dancing. I don’t like Kathleen much, she is so very rough, and pinches rather quickly.”

“That is extremely naughty,” interpolated George.

“I am so afraid of roughness. I do hope my baby won’t grow up into a rough brother.”

“It won’t matter to you, dear, because you are so much older than he is. When he is only seven you will be fourteen, and quite a big girl.”

Petronel looked up with a puzzled face. “Are you quite sure of that?” she asked doubtfully.

“Perfectly,” George assured her.

After a few minutes’ meditation, Petronel remarked:

"I almost wish Kathleen Fane wouldn't go to Heaven."

"But she won't until she has grown quite gentle and good," said George, by way of consolation.

"I suppose angels are never rough, nor pinch?"

George felt the theological difficulties were thickening, so he changed the subject.

"Where do you get your frocks?" he asked.

"Does Alice Darnley make them?"

"No; my nurse. Once I went to a big shop in London with Mummy, and she bought me a ready-made frock for best." Then, after a moment's thought, she added: "I suppose God makes all the ready-made clothes in shops?"

Before her friend could reply they reached the Old House, where Lavinia Garland lived with her mother—a dear, gabled homestead, with a little path and wicket-gate into the road, that straggled out of the village street, and a huge garden behind, sloping down to the meadow where the tiny river ran. The orchard was white with blossom, and up behind it rose the hill, from which could be seen the country round about Barnscombe stretching out for miles inland, and bounded on the west by the blue Atlantic.

Lavinia herself was watering the flowers in the garden. George looked at her with deep interest. A tall, slim, young woman, with a sweet face and graceful, willowy figure. In an instant the artist knew that she had quantities of fair, fluffy hair and large, light blue eyes; that the contour of her

face was almost beautiful, and its colouring delicate and good. Her manner was very gentle, even timid, as she advanced to meet them, and her voice soft and low.

"She is pretty, and womanly, and sweet," he thought to himself, "but she will never hold Jim."

"This is one of my greatest friends," explained Petronel, "who is painting a picture of my doll and me. I thought you'd like to see him."

"Petronel and her friends are always welcome at the Old House," answered Lavinia, with old-fashioned courtesy. "I will call my mother."

"I told Mr. Lumsden your honey was very nice," continued Petronel. "Him and me likes honey."

"You shall have some, my dear," Lavinia promised, "if Mr. Lumsden will be good enough to stay for tea."

"I should like it immensely," said George, feeling as if he were suddenly invited to tea in an old-fashioned picture book.

"Mrs. Garland and Miss Lavinia has proper tea with grace in the dining-room," Petronel confided in him. "They are much nicer than Mummy's kind of teas, what all slip about when you hand them."

Mrs. Garland was delighted to see the artist, and welcomed him with the warm hospitality of the sunny west country.

"So you are painting the child's portrait?" she observed, as she presided over the tea-pot. "I do

not hold with art and science and such-like new-fangled ideas myself, but, for those who do, I hear it is a fine thing to paint an Academy picture, which Lady Merrivale tells me yours is to be."

"I hope so," said George, spreading bread and honey.

"Might I go and speak something very important to Eliza in the middle of my tea?" asked Petronel suddenly.

"Will not it do afterwards, my dear?" said Lavinia, "for I expect Eliza is busy just now."

"And it is not good manners for little girls to leave the table in the middle of their teas," remarked Mrs. Garland.

"It is very important," pleaded the child.

"What is it you want to say?" queried George.

"I want to ask her if she likes cats," Petronel explained solemnly. "Do let me go."

George laughed, but Mrs. Garland was as adamant.

"It will do afterwards, my dear," said Lavinia soothingly.

But the child looked a little sad. It was just one of those momentous questions which she wanted settled without delay, only grown-ups are so slow to understand these things.

"I suppose you have a very busy life in the village here?" George asked, by way of making conversation with Lavinia.

"Oh, yes! There are always plenty of people

to see after, and to take soup and jellies to when they are ill."

"Lavinia is a wonderful hand at making invalid messes for folk," explained her mother. "I never approve of things between meals myself, but the girl is so tender-hearted, and James Cary only encourages her."

Lavinia blushed hotly at the mention of her lover's name before a stranger. It seemed to her a little improper of her mother to introduce it.

"I have been sitting with Mrs. Benbow this afternoon," she said softly. "Poor thing! She suffers dreadfully, and is such a sweet, good woman."

Petronel stopped in the middle of a bite of cake.

"Why does God let good people be hurt?" she asked, with a puzzled look on her dear little face.

George felt this was beyond his power to solve, and looked helplessly at Lavinia. Even Mrs. Garland hesitated for a reply, and then Petronel herself kindly came to the rescue.

"Never mind, if you don't know. We can easily find out in Child's Guide to Knowledge."

And they were all glad to leave it at that.

"I suppose you will soon be going back to London now?" queried Lavinia, "for Petronel tells me the picture is nearly finished."

"Yes. I shall be sorry." George could hardly realise that clubland and this Old House existed in the same country, or even the same century. "Do you know London well?"

"I have stayed there twice," explained Mrs. Garland; "but there were such a lot of folks I did not know, I could not get over it. The sights are fine, to be sure, but the number of people is astonishing, all cramped up in a parcel of streets, with not so much as an orchard in which to hang out a week's washing. Lavinia went with us the last time."

"And what did you think of it?" George wanted to know.

Oh! I had a cold in London," said Lavinia.

"I wish," began Petronel wistfully, "I knowed what is behind the wardrobe in the night-nursery."

"I can tell you, dear child," replied the artist quickly, for he saw the little lines and curves that fear drew on Petronel's face. "There is only just a plain wall."

"I thought there was a big hole," and she laid her tiny hand on his knee and looked up with starry eyes, "a big, black hole full of enemies. That is why I take Daddy's stick to bed with me, and Mummy's parasol. They would be very useful if the enemies came out."

"But there are no enemies," George hastened to assure her.

"P'r'aps not now. But they might come in the night, you see."

"Little girls should not think of such things," reproved Mrs. Garland, "but go to sleep with the birds and wake up with them."

When tea was over George felt somewhat tired

of the Garlands. Conversation was such uphill work, especially with Lavinia, that he wondered afresh how it was that Jim Cary had become engaged to any one so dull, and shrugged his shoulders at the prospect of their future married life. Still he was wise enough to know that the wonder of what lovers see in each other to love can never possibly be explained to a third person. It ranks with all those other best things in life, which no reason can explain and no science prove.

"Let you and me go back to our work," suggested Petronel, as they walked together across the fields which lay between the village and the woods. "I'm in the middle of painting a very exciting picture. All the sky is black and the darkest I can paint."

"But why such a cloudy sky?" the artist wanted to know.

Petronel's voice sank into an awe-stricken whisper.

"To show there's a wolf about," she explained, "a great, savage, wicked wolf what bites."

"You have the artistic temperament, my child," observed George.

"What is that? Is it a pain?"

And Petronel looked anxious.

"I am afraid it develops into one sometimes in this working-day world of ours," he replied whimsically.

"I don't feel it yet," the child assured him, as she patted her pinafore.

It was a few days after this that George Lumsden's picture of Petronel was finished. It was with great reluctance that he packed up his possessions and turned his thoughts once more to the far-away London which he had left behind him.

"Good-bye, little model," he said half-sadly, as the carriage overtook them at the old lodge gates. "Grow up into the dearest, sweetest, prettiest lady in the world, if you must grow up at all. But don't, if you can possibly help it."

"I'll remember," promised Petronel, holding up her flower-face for a kiss, "and come back soon to paint Gladys Rhubarb. I'll be here to meet you at the gate, I promise," and the blue of the sky, which was imprisoned by her curling lashes, glowed and deepened as she looked up at him.

"And here is a new sixpence for luck. What will you buy with it? A toy or chocolates?"

"I think a toy," replied Petronel thoughtfully, "for chocolates finish, you see."

"So do most nice things," added the artist, with a sigh.

"I feel," said the child sadly to herself, as the carriage drove away, "as if I wanted to go to tea with somebody who is very kind. I think I'll go and see Dr. Cary, 'cause he always calls me 'dear,' and has bigger kindness than Mrs. Garland or Miss Lavinia."

CHAPTER II

LAVINIA'S DECISION

"I WANT you to come for a walk with me after tea," said Jim Cary to Lavinia one day not long after George Lumsden had left Barnscombe.

"If Mother will let me. I know she has some sewing she wishes me to do for her, but I dare say that can wait till to-morrow."

"It will have to wait," replied her lover impatiently. "I have something I want to talk over with you before any more time slips away."

Lavinia looked vaguely alarmed.

"I must consider Mother's wishes. Indeed, James, I have no choice, as she always insists upon my doing so. And I do feel for her so very much since Father died. You would not wish me to disobey her, I know."

"Of course not. But you are making a mountain out of a molehill. I have only asked you to come for a walk with me."

"Forgive me, James, if I have vexed you," and the ready tears started to Lavinia's eyes. "It was only in my anxiety not to fail in my duty."

"You think too much of your duty—it is posi-

tively morbid to dwell so continually on it. Besides, you would always do it by instinct," he added, in a tenderer tone, "so don't worry, Lavinia. And you know I am not vexed with you, dear."

The sunshine came out again on her face.

"You are very kind to me, James."

"And you are to me when your head is not full of scruples, and cares, and anxieties innumerable. Never mind, when you are my wife I will save you from all worries."

Lavinia blushed hotly.

"Do not speak so," she whispered, "it is so very overpowering."

"What is? The thought of being my wife?" And he smiled at her downcast air.

"Oh! James," she pleaded, "you know what I mean. Do not tease me. But," and her voice sank so low that he had to stoop down to hear the end of her sentence, "the word—wife—upsets me."

Jim Cary laughed as he took her hand in his.

"Then I will not tease you," he promised.

Then the church clock chimed one, and Lavinia flew off, lest she should be a minute late for dinner; for during the whole thirty years of her life she had never dared to keep a single meal waiting over which her mother presided.

"Remember this evening," he called after her, "I will be at the sandy lane gate at six o'clock."

Mrs. Garland was one of those women who had ruled in her kingdom with a rod of iron ever since the time when she had vowed to "honour and

obey " her husband. She had made up the late doctor's mind for him on every possible question, and had given her opinion on every one of his cases. And woe to the unhappy man if, owing to his small portion of medical knowledge, he ever disagreed with her! Her two little daughters she had disciplined with a severity that broke the spirit of the younger and doubled that of the elder. They were brought up according to the letter as well as the spirit of Solomon's wisdom, and it was only the innate difference of the girls' temperaments that made Margaret able to withstand and even flourish under a system of such vigour as cowed and frightened the more delicate Lavinia. And perhaps, too, the yoke was unconsciously laid a little less heavily on Margaret; for her mother had a secret admiration for the spirit which possessed the bounding qualities of an india-rubber ball, and was never really kept under by all the rules and penalties of the discipline at the Old House. Mrs. Garland had indeed been known to go straight from the chastisement of her rebellious elder daughter and boast to neighbours of the splendid qualities with which Margaret was by nature endowed. Her severity was, she firmly believed, the grace by which these qualities would be further developed. When that grace really came, in the guise of a true love between Margaret and a certain Charley Royse, whose regiment camped out one summer near Barnscombe, Mrs. Garland strongly disapproved. Indeed, she was one of the many people who feel that they can do God's work

for Him so efficiently—even so much more efficiently—that they would really rather not trouble Him, except in the event of a great emergency. But Margaret Garland was not the girl to throw away her life's happiness whatever forces might oppose it. She was quick to see that her mother's objection to Captain Royse was only a prodigious prejudice which she was dressing up as a principle; so, in spite of maternal warnings, and many of Lavinia's tears, she married the man she loved, and, for five years, life brought her unclouded sunshine—a not altogether unworthy total when compared with the sum of happiness which many lives can reckon for themselves. It also brought her something better even than sunshine—a gradual unfolding of the best and tenderest parts of her character, which had been hidden and unsuspected in the keen, bracing atmosphere at home; the development and deepening of the influence of a true love, which the toils and cares of every-day life never tarnished, and which was crystallised into eternal perfection by the touch of death before it had time to wear commonplace or to have outlived its first golden ideals.

Margaret Royse stayed on with her only child in the little north country house which had been her husband's home; and, owing to very delicate health, which was the result of her unceasing devotion to him during his long last illness, she was very rarely able to come back to Devonshire.

With Lavinia, however, things had been quite different. Her meekness of disposition, inherited

from the pale-eyed little man who was her father, was intensified sevenfold by her mother's upbringing. The poor child was scolded through the measles, and many other infantile ailments, for sickness in the young was, in Mrs. Garland's eyes, very near akin to sin. And Lavinia, with unfailing regularity, caught every possible disease that her father knew of, and her mother forbade. So life was very hard to the delicate child, and unending streams of tears seemed to have washed all the pink off her cheeks, till she looked like a wax doll which has been kissed too often. She regarded her elder sister as the most daring and wonderful human being that it was possible to imagine; but when Margaret married and went away, her example and individuality soon faded from Lavinia's realisation, and life settled once more into a mere list of duties and penalties, through which she wound her way with a never-failing obedience. The childlike meekness, that accepts unresistingly whatever comes, lasted with Lavinia far beyond her childhood's days. At thirty she would no more have dreamed of questioning her father or mother's decisions than at thirteen, nor of deciding anything for herself in their presence.

Without one feeling of discontent, much less flash of defiance, she bowed her pretty head to the domestic storms, and loved her parents through it all as a dutiful daughter should. Her gentleness and amiability were stamped upon her face, for character draws its own illustrations very quickly after five-and-twenty; and a certain timid shrinking,

such as one sees in an animal that expects a blow, first drew Jim Cary to pity and be kind to her. He had come to Barnscombe as her father's partner, and to keep up the home to which his mother had married in her youth. The strength and vigour of the man filled Lavinia's soul with half-frightened admiration, but, when he began to try to help her, to fight her battles for her, and be as good to her as he was by instinct to every one who was weak and suffering, her feelings for him grew into an adoration, which, though carefully hidden in the depths of her heart, yet brought colour to her face, light to her eye, and a quiet gladness to her manner—signs which one's neighbours, especially in the country, are quick to read and interpret for their own gratification and interest, if for nothing more.

So talk began in Barnscombe about Lavinia and the young doctor, that cruel idle talk that does such an infinity of harm, and grows, like some rank weed, to choke the flower that might be springing there. And the talk at last reached Mrs. Garland's ears. Then was there terrible trouble at the Old House. Unfortunately for her mother's peace of mind, Lavinia was now too old to be whipped and sent to bed, but a suitable punishment would be forthcoming all the same. The culprit was condemned to days of tears and meditation in her own room, and fearful plans were being concocted to banish Lavinia from her home, so dearly-loved in spite of all she had suffered there, when a little bird, whose kind has never been found in any natural history

book, told the story to Jim Cary. A perfect passion of indignation and of pity overwhelmed him. He had never dreamed of marrying Lavinia, nor, indeed, thought of marrying any one, but he was not going to allow her to suffer like this, especially as it was in a way due to his action. He knew that he had spoken no word of love, nor given her the slightest encouragement, nor done a thing that was not in the way of ordinary friendship; but what mattered all that, if people talked and thought of Lavinia as if he had? He was not going to stand it, and if there was only one way out of the difficulty he would take that way. Besides, Lavinia was a sweet young woman, and a pretty young woman, and a good young woman, and if she were willing to marry him he would find in her an ideal wife. So Jim, being fairly young and not in love, argued with himself; and actually imagined that men marry girls because they possess certain attributes, and seem as if they would grow into ideal wives. He did not know then that a man meets his ideal woman ready-made, and he can hardly tell what her attributes are, and never thinks about what she might grow into, because he knows she is perfect as she is. So Jim Cary straightway went down to the Old House, and there bearded Mrs. Garland in her den with a manly courage that almost deprived Lavinia of breath.

Before he went home again they were engaged to be married, and the sunshine—which sometimes shines so brightly on the heels of a storm—flooded

the Old House; and Lavinia was no longer a naughty child in disgrace, but a much-honoured daughter whom the best representative of mankind in Barnscombe intended to marry. For this wonderful change Lavinia gave Jim Cary her deepest gratitude and admiring affection, and as long as she did not see him too often—an event which always left her overpowered with a sense of her own inferiority to his wonderful personality—she was perfectly happy and content. Her mother never bullied her again, and though the old habits of obedience still hung about her, she was no longer frightened and fettered in every thought and action. For Mrs. Garland accepted the fact that Lavinia had in a measure grown up at last, or else Jim Cary would never have proposed to her; and so the old discipline was in its turn finally laid aside together with the spelling-books and birch rods of earlier days. And in this new life Lavinia had no further wishes. She loved her home, and her bees, and her flowers, and her little domestic duties, and the tiny interests of a country parish, and the man who had insured her so much happiness therein. The thought of things ever being different frightened her, especially the thought of ever becoming Mrs. Cary—but she had a vague and comforting hope that their engagement might last for many years, and so she would have time to grow more worthy of such a great and difficult position. Jim Cary, however, was not so content. He had begun to feel that they had been engaged quite long enough, and though

he waited patiently until Lavinia had ceased outwardly to mourn for her father, who died the year after their engagement was announced, he then decided that he owed it to Lavinia to bring the present state of things to an end, and to let them begin life again together.

A six o'clock he stood waiting for her at the gate, and very soon he saw the slim, white figure coming across the field.

Lavinia had never looked so pretty in her life as she did that evening. Her fresh muslin dress, with a bunch of pink roses at her waist, brought out her delicate colouring, and gave her the appearance of some sweet flower itself. The low-lying sunlight burnished her fair hair with a glory it lacked of itself, and just touched her face with a pinker light than her pale cheeks usually could boast. Jim's pulses quickened as he saw how fair she looked, and he went to meet her with a tenderer look in his eyes than had ever been there before.

"I am so glad you came," he said, with a proud smile of possession. "And how nice you look, dear!"

She glanced up at him shyly.

"I am pleased you like my dress, James."

"I like what is in it a great deal better. It is you, not your dress, I admire so much."

"Oh, no! You are mistaken. You would not think I looked nice if I had on my shabby, old morning gown and my cooking-apron," which was per-

fectly true, only Lavinia was foolish to remind him of it.

"Cooking-apron, indeed!" he answered impatiently; "you shall never wear such a thing when your home is mine."

"But, James, I like to help a little in the kitchen on busy mornings. I can do some things very nicely, Mother says."

"You shall never be a household drudge for me. I should hate the idea of your toiling in a hot kitchen for such a paltry thing as my dinner, and roughening your pretty hands for the sake of a pudding or a cake. No, Lavinia—if I could not afford to save my wife from hard work, I would never have one."

Lavinia was silent. It was for Jim to lay down the law, and for her to obey it; still, she felt a pang of regret at the thought of how her little culinary accomplishments would be wasted.

"Mother was very kind about letting me come," she said, as they strolled together down the sandy lane that led to the shore.

"Letting you come!" And he laughed half-scornfully. "You belong to me, you know, and if you wanted to come, because I wanted you to, nothing or nobody shall prevent you."

"Oh, James; how recklessly you speak! I never can feel able to do things on my own account."

"Then you shall on mine."

"If Mother approves," she answered softly.

Now Jim Cary was a very human man, and this

constant introduction of his future mother-in-law's authority into all his suggestions, he found decidedly irritating. He rather liked Mrs. Garland, in her proper place, and was quite equal to her encounters; but he did not like the way in which Lavinia always placed his wishes second in her estimation, while her mother's whims were first.

So words of impatience rose to his lips, but when he looked down on the girl beside him, and saw how gentle and timid she was, and with what pleading eyes she was watching his face, the feeling of vexation vanished, and he stooped and kissed her as she stood, and said very gently:

"I want you to fix our wedding-day to-night. Time is slipping away, and we must waste no more of it. So tell me, dear, how soon you can be ready, and I will do my best to make you happy."

Lavinia burst into tears, and Jim looked distressed.

"What is the matter?" he begged her to tell him.

But she sobbed on, her face buried in her hands.

"Does the thought of marrying me make you so unhappy?" he asked earnestly; "don't you love me, Lavinia?"

"Oh, yes!" in muffled tones. "I think so. But—but—" and her reason was choked with tears.

"Tell me," he whispered, putting his arm tenderly round her willowy waist, "and I promise to help you, if I can."

"I am so upset," she murmured.

"Foolish girl! You must not be upset because I want to claim the love you have given me."

"And—and Mother would be angry at your kissing me out of doors!"

Jim smiled.

"I will take the blame. But tell me, when will you give me the right to save you from all blame, and have you for my very own?"

"Oh, James, I cannot yet. I must not leave my Mother now she is alone."

"But you will be near her. And you have already stayed with her for more than a year since your father died."

"But a year is such a little time, and she will be so lonely."

"A year is a long time, Lavinia. And I, too, shall be lonely without you."

"But I feel it is my duty, James, to stay with her. Oh, do not tempt me away!"

"Have you no duty to me?" and his voice rang rather sadly—"the man whom you have promised to marry, and who has already waited for you so long?"

"Why, James, it seems but yesterday that we became engaged. And," with a fresh flood of tears, "I am so happy as I am. Please don't spoil it all."

Jim Cary looked at her curiously.

"When may I speak then?" he asked.

"Not yet, James; please not yet. I am not ready."

"But I am. Ready and waiting long enough

ago. And I feel the time has come for me to make this change."

"And Mother cannot spare me," she continued tremulously. "Oh, James, please do not make me!"

"I would never make any woman marry me against her will, Lavinia. You mistake me if you imagine that."

"And do not be angry with me. I cannot help it, really. Your speaking in this way to-night is so sudden."

"I have been wanting to speak for a long while; but I thought you would rather I waited until you had left off your mourning. But now there is nothing more to wait for—if ever we are to be married?"

"Oh, yes! There is. I must have time to grow more fitted to be your wife."

"No, dear. I want you to be my wife just as you are. For nobody would ever do anything if they waited to be perfect before doing so."

"It is my duty to stay with, and care for, my mother. I cannot, cannot leave her yet!" she repeated vehemently.

"Then when will you leave her, Lavinia? When will things be different?"

"Oh! I cannot tell. Do not be so unkind to me, James; I cannot bear it."

"Unkind to you, dear! What are you thinking of? Is it unkind to want you so much?"

"Oh, no! But it is unkind to press me so against my duty, when you know how weak I am."

“What do you want me to do then, Lavinia?” he asked very gravely. “You know I wish to do what is best for you.”

“Do not speak of marrying yet,” she begged him.

“Is it because you do not love me enough? Do you wish our engagement broken off?”

“Oh, James!” cried the girl, clinging to his arm in a renewed burst of grief, “it will kill me if you speak like that! What shall I do? What shall I do?” And he felt her whole frame shaking with her sobs.

“Hush, dear, hush!” trying to soothe her. “I will not distress you any more. Tell me what you wish me to do, and I will do it.”

“Leave things as they are. Please do. I am so happy in them. And promise me that you will not speak of these things again until—until I ask you to myself.”

Jim Cary looked at her pleading, tear-stained face, and he saw the trouble in her eyes. He hated to hurt her, as he would any creature weaker than himself. So when she begged again, “Please promise, James!” he said solemnly:

“Very well, dear, I promise.”

But he did not kiss her again. His manner during the rest of their walk was quiet and gentle, and he talked of the simple things that always interested Lavinia, till her smiles came back, and she rose like some harebell, apparently crushed underfoot, but really unbroken and unhurt.

“Good-bye, James,” she whispered at the wicket-gate when they parted, for the doctor would not come in to supper that evening; “I am so pleased things are all right again, and you are not angry with me. You are very kind to me, and I am so happy that nothing is changed.”

“I am glad you are happy,” he said slowly, as he turned away.

And so he was; but things were changed for all that, though Lavinia never saw it. Jim Cary possessed the artistic temperament to such an extent that he would have taken the humdrum little romance that circumstances had fixed upon him, and tended it so carefully and tenderly that it might one day have blossomed into a beautiful flower. And so Lavinia's life might have been also blessed and enriched. But when she made him give her that promise she robbed herself and him of the best that was possible in their knowledge of each other. She chilled his affection for her, which had never risen so high as when they started on that walk together, with so unexpected a wave of cold, that it never really recovered. It hurt him considerably to take her at her word, but he had promised, and Jim Cary's promises were made of unbreakable stuff. Slowly but surely the imperceptible change crept in. Jim no longer looked at his home with eyes that saw Lavinia's form presiding at his table, and sitting by his fire, and filling every room with her gentle presence. He ceased to look forward to a new life, which she would share with him, and to

wonder how best he could make that life a perfect one. He began to think more of his patients and less of Lavinia, and the new thoughts were almost as interesting to him as the old. His house grew fuller of books and works of art, and he found that it made quite a happy home, and the garden was very good in which to spend the few spare moments that he could find him in a full day's work. It was nice to know that Lavinia was his friend, and that he had an interest in his engagement to her, which he enjoyed when he had leisure to do so, and he felt that as she was happy in the present state of things, he would be happy too.

And Lavinia was happy—far happier than she had been in the first year of her engagement. She was no longer so much afraid of Jim, for he ceased talking to her of himself and her, and such talk had always embarrassed and made her nervous. Lavinia liked to talk of what she did, never of what she felt; of the little outside world, and not of the great soul-world inside. And when Jim stopped trying to take her with him in these flights of fancy and of feeling and of thought, which left her so breathless before, she began to be more at home with him, and to look forward to their meetings with a quiet joy.

“Do you know, Mother,” she began one evening, as they sat over their work in the quaint little drawing-room, which it seemed a shame to call anything but a parlour, “I find James a much more congenial companion than I used.”

“And a good thing, too, my dear! If folks do not grow more congenial to one another, they grow less so, and that is a poor look-out for those who are engaged to be married.”

“I cannot help feeling that he is improved, though of course it is presumptuous of me even to think that James could be improved.”

“Presumptuous, indeed! Pack of rubbish! I should like to see the man who could not be improved, but I reckon it will have to be in the next world that I look out for him. Why, my dear, I never lost a day without trying to improve your poor father, and he was but faulty at the end. Men take a lot of improving, and, in most cases, it is trouble thrown away.”

“I think perhaps improved was hardly the right word to have used. You see, Mother, he is always so wonderfully clever; but somehow, lately, he has seemed more sensible as well.”

“Sense is a rare quality among men. Your father never had a morsel. I often wonder whatever he would have done without me. Died in the work-house as likely as not.”

“I may have been mistaken,” continued Lavinia, “for I know so little about the ways of men. But sometimes, very rarely, it seemed to me he did say rather silly things.”

“What kind of things?” demanded her mother, with interest.

“Oh, I could not repeat them! It would be

disloyal. But the kind of things I could not imagine my father saying."

"Love-making rubbish, I suppose? I never allowed anything of the kind."

"They did not seem silly when he said them, but afterwards, when I used to repeat them to myself, they were. At least I used to think you would call them so."

"More likely than not, my dear."

"So I am very thankful he never does now. And all his conversation is so much nicer—do not you think so, Mother?"

"He is a fine talker, is Jim Cary! The Carys always were. I like the man very well in his way, and you must remember you are more fortunate than you deserve, Lavinia."

"Oh, yes, Mother! I know. It was not in a discontented spirit I spoke, but in one of great gratitude."

"And well you might. The Carys are one of the oldest families in Devonshire, and here is James, such a clever, attractive man, who might have married any one, engaged to you, Lavinia. It fairly amazes me!"

"I have indeed much to be thankful for," murmured her daughter, puckering her smooth brows over the picking up of a dropped stitch in her knitting.

Now, it never occurred to Mrs. Garland that the match she was surprised at was in reality of her own making. It was true she had not tried to catch the

young doctor, as she had always considered that if her daughters should desire to get married, they would be guilty of an impropriety and undutifulness which she would do all in her power to correct. Time and Margaret had taught her a different lesson, but she had expected distinctly better things of the meek Lavinia. And it would have amazed her had she known the truth, that it was entirely her severity with the girl that had brought Jim forward as a lover, moved by the pity which is only akin to the feeling he professed. After awhile, however, she settled down to the fact, and began to enjoy the intercourse with Jim Cary that the engagement involved.

“ You see, Mother, it makes it much easier now I understand James so much better. He used to speak of such strange things that I felt quite in a maze. But it is so nice and comfortable to have him to tell how many eggs the fowls have laid in a week, and to consult him about the bees, and to ask his advice about my Sunday-school class. His opinion is so very valuable, and he listens so readily and makes up his mind so quickly about things.”

“ He comes of a self-opinionated race, my dear. The Carys have never been at a loss yet for a will of their own. And James is a Cary down to the ground he will be buried in.”

“ Oh, Mother! Do not say such dreadful things. It makes me shiver to speak of burials.”

“ Pack of nonsense, Lavinia! It is what we shall all come to, and the sooner we make up our

minds to it the better. I have no patience with such sentimental rubbish. 'Man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upwards,' so what is the use of making a fuss about it?" and the good lady smiled placidly over the woes of mankind.

"But we need not think of it, Mother."

"That is you all over. Putting off whatever has got to be done, and then frightened into a blue moon because you are not ready. I hope I shall not be there to see it, Lavinia; but there will be as much worry over your deathbed as any I have ever presided at. I can see you now screaming and fainting until there is no doing anything with you. May you be taken unawares in your sleep, is what I hope, for the sake of those about you."

"I cannot help feeling afraid of so many things," apologised Lavinia humbly.

"How I ever had a child like you is a puzzle to me, my dear. But it comes of marrying such a man as your poor father. His very muscles were made of wet rag, as it were, and his nerves no stronger than fish bones. Why, many's the time I have seen him quite upset by just a simple, ordinary, village death. He was not fit to be a doctor—indeed it would be difficult to say what he would have been fit for. And you take after him astonishingly, Lavinia."

"Yes, Mother," replied her daughter meekly. "I have often heard you say so. Poor Father!"

"It is a misfortune for you, Lavinia, I allow. But you give way to it too much."

"That is what James says. But he does not understand fear."

"I do not blame you," continued her mother, "for being afraid of pestilences and earthquakes and my displeasure and such-like—but when you are so frightened of every little thing, as if it were a mouse, it is really foolish of you."

"I know," and Lavinia spoke sadly, "but I cannot alter myself. It is too late now."

"My dear, it is never too late to alter ourselves for the better—and it is nonsense to say we cannot do things that we can."

"But you are so clever! It is different with me."

"There are three things that we can always make the best of, however clever or the reverse we may be, and those are ourselves, our circumstances, and other people. Never forget that, Lavinia, and you will be a happy woman."

"Yes, Mother dear, I will try."

And when Lavinia went up to bed that night she leaned through the latticed window and stood for a while drinking in the pure, night air, and thinking over what her mother had told her about her own shortcomings.

"It is very kind of James to care for me," she mused—not knowing that when people really care it is not kind at all. "And I am far happier than I deserve to be in this much-loved home, and with such a good mother to take care of me. I will try to be more worthy of it all." And then her thoughts

wandered to the fowl-pen and the bee-hive, and she looked out at the great wonder of the night, and saw only the shadows of the buildings and the gate which shut in almost the whole of her tiny world. The great silence brought her no message from God; no yearning after a deeper life than can be expressed in words; no soothing touch of a healing Hand laid gently on earth's cares and worries. For as yet Lavinia knew not that she had need of these things. She only felt that it was bedtime, and with a smile of perfect content, she knelt down to say the same simple prayers she had always said since she was a child, and so was blessed, only as a child, before she fell asleep.

CHAPTER III

AFTER LONG YEARS

It was nearly nine years since Petronel's portrait had hung in the Academy, and brought its painter so much fame. Nine years of hard work to George Lumsden as he steadily advanced in the way of success, and was filled with the exhilaration of drawing nearer to a goal before actually attaining it. There is no happier time in the professional life of any man, for in all human nature the progressive instinct is strong. Standing still brings no real rest and is indeed an impossible attitude for any length of time. There must be movement backwards or forwards, and the man is an averagely happy one whose onward movement is an upward movement, too; who climbs each year up the ladder of his work and enlarges his powers of hand and head by the greater demand he is ever making on them. A few are content with a higher ideal to seek after, which is out of sight to the dim-eyed sons of men—a few who find earth's ways a little dull and would mount up on wings as eagles into that rarer atmosphere which is the soul's native air, and who find their reward in reaching the heights.

of beauty of thought and feeling, of hope and faith. Thrice happy are these.

Now George Lumsden was an artist of the best type, and his picture of Petronel Merrivale indicated that at the very beginning of his career. The beauty of her surroundings was transferred to Burlington House with a skill that brought a breath of spring laden with the scent of the bluebells right into the heart of London—and the beauty of the child's dawning soul was portrayed with even greater and far deeper skill. The undeveloped possibilities of such a nature as hers were shown in some subtle way, so that any one who could, might read them. And the artist's secret was that in that spring of long ago he had made a friend as well as a model of the child, and in learning to love Petronel he learned the only way of really understanding her, and of seeing that deeper thing which is the soul of any picture, and must be there to vivify a work that shall live. From time to time he thought of the dear child with almost reverent affection; and when after long years he was once again passing through the old west country district in which was Petronel's home, he could not resist halting on his journey and going back to Barnscombe to learn what tidings time would have to tell him of his old friends there.

It all looked just the same as before, for villas do not grow so quickly on the Devonshire soil as in the atmosphere of a smoky town, and nine years, when we look backwards, is not so very long after

all. The same soft, sweet air blew in his face, and the cool wind was laden with the fresh, salt smell of the sea. The way was lined by the familiar flowers which he and Petronel had gathered on a May-day of long ago; and funny little companies of children, dressed apparently in coloured paper, were wandering about the village with a tawdry May-pole, singing unintelligible songs in their high, shrill voices. George hurried on to the Court, where he almost expected to see the little figure in pinafore and sun-bonnet gathering bluebells once again in the wood. He looked across the stream to the doctor's cottage hospital, and noted that the ivy and virginia creeper were having a race as to which should cover it first. The window boxes were bright with hyacinths, and the cowslips made yellow patches all along the path beyond. But he could not wait to see Jim Cary then. The shortest cut to the Court was through the churchyard, and, as George walked across it, his heart suddenly stood still, for there, right in front of him, was a small white cross, and on it he read the simple word "Petronel." No date, no details, but the length of the little green mound told its own story, and a few patches of lichen clinging to the foot of the cross. A great wave of regret swept over George Lumsden at the thought that his dear child-friend was lost to him for ever. It was no use his hurrying to the Court now—everything was different in spite of its all looking the same. Who of us does not know the pang of that irrevocable difference that falls over the most familiar

things when we come back amongst them alone? So George waited by the tiny grave and thought of the child as she filled her pinafore with bluebells in that long-ago spring-time. And he smiled sadly at the thought that after all Petronel would have had a good time in Heaven before Kathleen Fane was ready to joint her there. He pictured the merry squire sobered by the loss of his only daughter, and the frivolous mother taught wisdom in a school of sorrow. He pitied the baby for missing the knowledge of its dear little "head-mother," and wondered whether the boy would look at him through Petronel's blue eyes. He felt a pang of unreasonable irritation against Jim Cary for not being able, as a doctor, to save that little life, and he wished he had never come to Barnscombe again to keep the tryst he had made in fun with Petronel when he said good-bye to her at the old lodge gates.

"Perhaps I had better call there, as I have come so far," he thought listlessly, turning at last away. As he skirted the old wood, where they used to play together, he almost hated the mass of wild hyacinths for looking so bright and blue, and everywhere there rose before him the ghost of a little white cross, with its one carved word, "Petronel."

In the sadness of his mood the sound of cheerful voices jarred, and as he turned the corner he saw a crowd of smart people on the croquet lawn, and heard roars of laughter from a group of young men, who were evidently teaching a long-legged schoolgirl how to smoke. She sat on the back of

a garden seat, swinging her legs, and resolutely holding a cigarette between her teeth. Her hat was tilted on one side, her hands were in her jacket pockets, and her voice sounded sharp and impudent as she spoke to her friends between the whiffs.

George Lumsden shrugged his shoulders and looked away. Lady Merrivale had seen and was coming to meet him, and somehow George felt a sudden relief in seeing that her dress was black. It showed that in spite of the gay scene Petronel was not entirely forgotten.

“Oh, Mr. Lumsden,” she cried, with outstretched hands, “I knew at once it was you! How sweet of you to come and look us up again after all these ages! You are such a swell now we should never have dared to ask you. Petronel will be so delighted to see you again!”

“Petronel!” exclaimed George, in amazement.

“Yes, you know—my little girl! Surely you haven’t forgotten her, and that exquisite picture you did for us of her in the wood?”

“But I have just come through the churchyard,” answered George, more mystified than ever.

“The churchyard!” Lady Merrivale repeated, with a puzzled look, and then light suddenly seemed to dawn upon her. “Oh, I know what has happened now!” she exclaimed. “You saw my little niece’s grave, and she was a Petronel, too. There is always a Petronel in every branch of the Merrivales. She was deformed, poor little thing, so it really was a blessing she was taken instead of Celia,

who is quite pretty. They both had scarlet fever, you know, together. And you thought it was our Petronel!" continued her ladyship, throwing up her hands. "How awful! I am so sorry—glad, I mean—that it was all a mistake!"

"Then is the real Petronel here?" asked George, his mind in a perfect whirl.

"Of course she is! Petronel," called her mother, "come here and see your old friend, Mr. Lumsden! You remember his painting your picture, don't you?—the one that hangs in the dining-room in Park Lane. You were such a tiny thing then, but you haven't forgotten him, I expect."

"Rather not," replied the girl with the cigarette, who had come at Lady Merrivale's call; "he is more likely to have forgotten me."

"I should not have known you," said George slowly, "you are altered so much."

"Not gone off?" cried Lady Merrivale anxiously. "You don't really think that, I do hope. Of course she is at such a dreadfully difficult age just now—sixteen is always hopeless—and she is so tiresome about neglecting her complexion; but next year I shall bring her out. She will be a beauty then, don't you think?" and she awaited his reply anxiously.

George looked the girl over from head to foot. She was awkward and angular, and moved in a slanging kind of way, and her clothes were sporting, and her shirt-collar and tie very mannish; but he saw again the beautiful outline of face and fea-

tures, and the same wonderful eyes which she had as a child. The whole expression of the face, however, was changed. A hard look had written itself round the once sweet mouth, and a scornful glance shot from those heaven-coloured eyes. All the delicate, dainty little demure ways that had made the child Petronel so dear were lost, and this girl was rough, and rather loud in her manners. George Lumsden wished he had gone straight home from the churchyard, even with the sad memory of his little friend fallen asleep under the grass and flowers.

"Of course you will stay to dinner?" sounded her ladyship's voice. "What! got no dress clothes? You will have to borrow some, then, for we can't possibly let you go. I should think Bob's might fit you, only they will be a little short in the arms and legs. What fun!" And her laugh rang out merrily, if somewhat noisily, too.

"They won't let me dine downstairs yet," chimed in Petronel; "but I will pay them out for it. You'll see."

"Where is Robin?" asked Lady Merrivale of her daughter, as George shook hands with Sir Robert, and was introduced to sundry other guests.

"Gone sailing," said Petronel shortly, "with Dr. Cary. He promised he would take him after tea, so Robin had tea about three o'clock, and tore off directly after."

"I hope to goodness he won't get drowned," replied Lady Merrivale. "We have no spare boy in this family, you see, Mr. Lumsden."

"Robin is a fool," observed his sister crossly. "We wanted him to make up the numbers for the croquet tournament, and he said he would rather go with the doctor—silly ass. And now Jack Wyndham can't play, because he's the odd one."

"It don't matter," observed a young man pleasantly; "I should never have had a chance of winning."

"What rot!" replied Petronel. "Of course you would. You would have licked me into fits!"

"Now you are fishing for compliments," continued Captain Wyndham. "You know you are a dead shot."

"She has a wonderful eye," her father boasted proudly to George.

"She used to have wonderful eyes," observed the artist.

"Ha! ha! very good," laughed Sir Robert, thinking it was a joke.

"It is billiards that has done it, Daddy," chimed in Petronel, "and you taught me to play."

"I will teach you a good deal more yet," said her father, clapping her on the back.

George thought he had already done enough in that direction.

"Come, Petronel," called somebody, "you are in for the next game."

"They are playing a croquet tournament for a sweepstakes," Sir Robert explained.

"What will you bet on me, Mr. Lumsden?" asked the girl, sitting on the head of her mallet;

“of course we bet on everybody as well. It is no fun without.”

“Petronel,” cried Lady Merrivale, “you must play up. I have a pair of gloves on you.”

“And ‘with all my worldly goods’ I thee back,” chimed in Jack Wyndham.

“And you, Mr. Lumsden?” she persisted.

“I won’t bet on you at all,” he answered quickly. Imagine betting on what had once been Petronel!

The girl was excited. Her first break was a brilliant one, and then she missed an easy hoop.

“Oh, dash it!” she exclaimed petulantly.

George Lumsden turned to Lady Merrivale.

“I think I will walk down into the village before dinner,” he said, “and look up my friend Cary. I suppose he is an old married man by this time?”

Her ladyship laughed.

“He has never married yet, and goodness knows if he ever will now. So there is still hope for Jim.”

“But why not? He was engaged to Miss Garland when I was here nine years ago.”

“And he is engaged to her still. She would not marry and leave her mother, or some rubbish of that kind, and of course the old lady instantly took out a fresh lease of life, and is as hale and hearty and hateful as ever. Lavinia seems to follow the example of a maid of mine who never left to be married, and when I asked the reason she said, ‘No, thank you, my lady; a single life and a sweetheart is the life for me.’”

George smiled.

"Then Barnscombe is just the same down in the village as it used to be?"

"Much of a muchness," sighed Lady Merri-vale. "Oh, Petronel!" as the girl stood near them waiting for her turn, "what do you think? Mr. Lumsden imagined that Lavinia Garland had become Mrs. Cary."

The girl laughed noisily.

"Why, the farthest back thing I can remember is wanting to be Lavinia's bridesmaid when I was a kid. I shall be ready for her to be mine first if she doesn't look out."

"What nonsense, child," said her mother reprovingly; "as if a little old maid like Lavinia wouldn't spoil the look of any wedding."

"She won't spoil mine," added the girl sharply, "and for a very good reason."

"We dine at eight, which means half-past," screamed her ladyship, as George jumped the sunk fence and started across the fields.

How still the country lay, steeped in the warm sunshine which brings summer to the happy west country when other people have only just begun spring. The village seemed to be having its afternoon nap, and the May-day children, tired of their tramp, had all gone home to tea. The scene was very soothing, and George shrank from calling anywhere just then, lest more change should mar the sense of its unbroken beauty. The Court was spoiled, but let him still keep the dear old mem-

ory of Barnscombe. He therefore stayed in the fields and decided to make for the sand-hills and the shore. He could look up Jim Cary on his way back again. The only human being he saw was a small boy swinging violently on a gate, and as he drew near, he guessed it was no less a person than the only son of Sir Robert Merrivale. A nice, curly-headed little fellow, but with none of his sister's beauty.

"Look out! hold hard!" called George, for he wanted to go through the gate.

The boy started so suddenly that he fell off, and George rushed to the rescue with much contrition.

"You are not hurt, I hope?" he asked anxiously.

"Rather not, thanks!" answered Robin cheerfully; "but I say, you did make a fellow jump."

"I am very sorry. I thought you had seen me coming."

"I'm waiting here for Dr. Cary," the boy explained; "we are going out sailing, only somebody's bad at the farm up there, and he had to go. Rather a sell for us, wasn't it? I'm afraid it will be too late now. I say," he added, with interest, "where are you staying?"

"At the Court," replied George.

Robin laughed.

"You don't pull my leg like that," he exclaimed shrewdly. "It's my home."

"I thought it was," continued George, smiling,

“but I am staying there all the same. I arrived unexpectedly this afternoon.”

“Oh, I say. I beg your pardon,” broke in Robin; “only it did sound rather like a whale, you see. Do you know Dr. Cary?”

“I knew him a long time ago.”

“He’s a splendid sort of chap, isn’t he?” said the boy enthusiastically. “I’d like to grow up just his sort.”

“Perhaps you will,” George suggested, leaning against the gate, on the top of which Robin again sat astride.

“Rather not!” said the boy, shaking his head. “I’m not half clever enough, nor good enough at things. But I shall jolly well like to grow a bit like him. I’ve been awful friends with him all my life,” he added, in a middle-aged kind of way.

“That was lucky for you,” interpolated the artist.

“I should just think it was.” Then confidentially: “There’s only one thing about the doctor that I can’t make out.”

“What is that?”

“Why, he’s such a big, strong, manly sort of fellow, you know; splendid at everything he does, and the sort even all the big chaps at school like to talk to, and”—here Robin’s voice was lowered with sad wonder—“he is actually engaged to be married to a woman!”

“But lots of men get married, you know.”

“Married, yes!” exclaimed the boy. “Our

headmaster is. I suppose they can't help it. But to be engaged is an awfully stupid, rotten thing. I would like to ask him why ever he is, only somehow I daren't. He gave me a hot old jaw once for something cheeky I said."

"Then he is strict?" queried George.

"Sometimes. But only for low, caddish things. He isn't a bit about fighting or just larks. He gave me half-a-crown when I licked Billy Benbow," and Robin's face lit up with sweet memories.

"What had Billy Benbow done?"

"Why, hit old Mrs. Moore with a great snow-ball. She nearly fell down and cried. I told him it was a shame, and he said he'd fight, so we fought."

"And you licked him?"

"I did, and he's ever so much bigger than me. But Dr. Cary had taught me how to box, so I got him nicely. He knew no better than just to lam out. Sis said I was a pig when I got home 'cause my nose bled."

"I painted that picture of Petronel," George told him.

"What a jolly clever chap you must be," the boy exclaimed. "Only it isn't much like her, is it?"

"It was when she was seven years old," said George half-sadly.

"Mother thinks she is awfully pretty, but I don't. I like much redder cheeks and jolly fat faces, like Jennie Moore's."

"Hadn't you a little cousin called Petronel, too?" asked George. He liked the boy's simple confidences, and his merry fearless ways. He decided Robin was the best of the Merrivales—now.

"Yes," and the boyish face suddenly sobered, "she died. She was just as old as me, only she couldn't walk; but I liked her awfully. I cried when they told me she was dead, but Dr. Cary said he and I must be much gladder than sorrier, 'cause she was quite well and happy now, and having all the nice times she'd missed through being lame; and so people who were as fond of her as him and me are must be pleased, and not think about ourselves. I shouldn't have minded if Celia had died a bit—she is so much littler and stupider than Petronel was, and cries if you give her even the gentlest knock."

"Where do they live?" George wanted to know.

"At the Rectory. Uncle Wilfred is the clergyman. He preaches horrid sermons. I never know what they are all about. I say," with a sudden change of subject, "can you sail?"

"I am not sea-sick, if that is what you mean," answered George, lighting his pipe.

Robin shook the gate with laughter.

"Can you manage a sailing boat, I mean, stupid?" he exclaimed, with much merriment.

"Oh, no!" George had to confess. "Can you?"

"Well, not exactly yet," said Robin proudly,

"but I'm learning. Dr. Cary's teaching me. I am going to be a sailor of course, you know."

"You are at school now, I suppose?"

"Rather. I went to Roundells last term. I wasn't going till I was ten, and I had a tutor, only he was such a muff Daddy sent him away. He kissed Petronel—wasn't he an ass? And then it was hardly worth while getting another, so the Head said he'd have me at Roundells under age 'cause I was a Merrivale."

"And a Merrivale worth having, too," thought the artist. "I am glad he is not staying to be spoiled at home."

"I shall go on to the Britannia when I am thirteen," continued the boy, "if I pass. Dr. Cary says of course I shall pass," rather doubtfully. "I am in the Head's house. He's awful!"

"What kind of awfulness?" asked George lazily.

"Oh, you know!—the kind that makes your heart beat when he looks at you. I have been sent up to him once," he added, in a solemn voice; "it was for saying 'damn.' He told me to remember he was not going to punish me for being wicked, but for being ungentlemanly and vulgar. I used to think before that gentlemen often said it. But, I say," he continued, cheering up at the recollection, "what do you think the Head has got himself?"

George could not imagine.

"Why, a baby! Doesn't it seem a queer, funny little thing for a headmaster to have? I expect he's jolly riled."

"Perhaps he is fond of it?" George suggested, with a smile.

"Fond of it!" exclaimed Robin scornfully. "That's all you know about him! Why, he is an awful swell, and thinks even some of the Sixth are stupid!"

The artist threw back his head and laughed.

"We all laughed pretty well, too, I can tell you," said Robin, with a chuckle. "The choir roared after the christening, 'cause, you know, they saw him have to hold it, and it screamed itself into a fit, Smith Minor said, and wriggled like mad."

"Is it a boy or a girl?"

"Boy. Rather rough on it having the Head for a father, don't you think?" And then without waiting for an answer he burst out, "We had the most tremendous fun at the old boys' match. Dr. Cary came—he was there once at school himself, only he is too old even to be an old boy now—and he was my friend and had tea with me, and heaps of the fellows wanted to be invited, even some of the biggish ones. And we ate hundreds of sausages, and he tipped us all silver for dessert, only me gold, because it was my party."

"And I suppose your mother and Petronel come to see you sometimes?" George asked, just by way of keeping up the conversation.

Robin's face fell.

"They did once," he said gloomily, "but some of the other fellows didn't much like Mother. They said she squinted; but that's a lie, isn't it?"

"Of course it is."

"And Petronel would walk round the playground with me. It makes a chap look rather a fool having a sister, don't you think?"

The artist had never considered the relationship in that light, but then he had never had a sister himself.

"The second eleven were having a match that day," continued Robin, "and Sis called them 'little boys,' and I believe Turner overheard"—his little round face becoming quite careworn at the remembrance. "Oh, I say!" he suddenly shouted, "there is Dr. Cary. Hurrah!"

And George saw his friend coming down the hillside with the same springing step and graceful bearing he remembered so well. He noted that the years had written no change in the doctor's appearance. He looked, as George always thought of him as looking, a strong, well-trained man in the prime of life, with just that indescribable dash of style which he had inherited from a race of distinguished ancestors. His face lit up with a smile of welcome as he recognised George.

"Why, Lumsden," he cried, in his cheery voice, "this is a surprise! When did you come?"

"Only to-day," answered George, shaking his friend's hand. "I came to see my old friend Petronel."

"Ah," said the doctor slowly, "she has—grown a good deal." And he laid his hand caressingly on Robin's curly head.

George took out his watch.

"I wanted to see you," he said, "and this young man said you would eventually appear."

"I say," broke in Robin, rather anxiously, "couldn't you come for a sail with us?"

Jim Cary laughed.

"I promised this youngster," he explained. "Can't you join us?"

George readily agreed, and they immediately started seawards. Robin was slightly bored by the introduction of a third person and the talk of old times between George Lumsden and Jim, but he had his catapult with him, and that has a greater charm for the boy-mind than even the most brilliant conversation. And when they reached the sea, the boat and its sails were all-engrossing.

George made no allusion to his friend's delayed marriage. There was something about Jim Cary, although his manner was so genial, that effectually prevented even the familiarity of common comradeship. George looked at him, and wondered what that something was, for he was telling so many of his own personal concerns, and Jim was listening with so much interest and sympathy—but he said little about himself in return.

George was late for dinner, but then so was every one else. The croquet tournament had taken so long, and Jack Wyndham would make a speech on presenting the prize to Petronel, and there was much paying up and settling of the different betting. Lady Merrivale won her gloves, and be-

stowed a motherly kiss on her daughter in consequence. It had been very gay and entertaining, and there had been many jokes and much laughter, all of which George was abundantly thankful to have missed.

"We won't have any precedence to-night," declared her ladyship, as dinner was announced, "for it is much too late, and I am much too hungry to remember who everybody is. Besides, a scramble will be much more fun. And the ladies shall choose. Here goes—I'm off with Mr. Lumsden. Now, girls, catch who catch can, and follow me," and she skipped off with George to the dining-room.

There was a good deal of screaming before the couples were finally arranged and the soup handed round.

"It is a shame that Miss Petronel should not be down to dinner," said Captain Wyndham, "in honour of her victory, if for nothing else."

"That is the one thing I will not allow," exclaimed Lady Merrivale, "and just this last year, too. Don't you remember that daughter of the Majendies whom every one was sick of by the time she came out, because she was always at everything before? Petronel is going to be a great surprise as well as a great treat next season."

"Poor little Petronel!" interpolated her father.

"Poor little Petronel!" echoed George Lumsden.

"Besides," continued Lady Merrivale, "I must have my last fling. Think of, and pity me, for next

year I shall be a middle-aged mother, with a grown-up daughter! How awful! Spectacles will be the next step, and I suppose a bath chair the next."

"How ridiculous you are, Lady Merrivale!" chimed in a colonel of Crimean reputation. "You and your daughter will be taken for sisters."

"It is nice and sweet of you to talk like that," replied her ladyship graciously. "I don't wonder that you have had so many medals bestowed upon you; you deserve them all."

"They were principally for services rendered in the Crimea," suggested Colonel Hope.

"Then you ought to have just double the number for services rendered in society."

"Were you really in the Crimea?" asked one of the girls who was staying in the house.

The colonel assented.

"And were you at Waterloo, too?" she continued admiringly.

"Hardly, my dear young lady," observed the colonel stiffly; and then Captain Wyndham changed the subject.

"I say, Sir Robert, I believe that promising son of yours is under this table. I have felt several suspicious attacks that are not at all canine."

"No, he isn't," exclaimed Lady Merrivale. "I have seen him come across the lawn since we sat down to dinner. Naughty boy, to stay out so late on that silly sea. But it is Dr. Cary's fault."

"I went out with them first," George explained, "but they put me back to be in time, and then

went off themselves for another expedition. I like Robin, Lady Merrivale. He is a jolly little chap."

"He is rather nice," assented his mother, "though frightfully naughty. Nobody can manage him at home except the doctor. I can only keep him good by giving him a shilling an hour to be so. It is not a bad plan."

"Expensive, I should imagine," said George dryly.

"Well, somebody must be under the table," cried Jack Wyndham suddenly; "if you will excuse me, Lady Merrivale, I will investigate."

And then there came a shriek and a squeal, and Jack dragged out Petronel.

"You naughty child!" exclaimed her mother merrily, and Sir Robert shouted with laughter.

"You said I should not come down to dinner," explained the girl triumphantly, "but I meant to all the same."

"I kept thinking it was a cat," chimed in the colonel. "What a clever young lady you are!"

"You must have some dinner now," suggested Captain Wyndham. "Come and sit by me. I am feeling so low because I was the last man chosen to go in with."

"I like to begin dinner with the entrées," observed Petronel. "Soup is so dull, and soles taste of being seedy."

"You only deserve bread and water," said Lady Merrivale reprovingly; and then to the footman,

“Hand Miss Petronel the quails and give her a champagne glass.”

So Petronel took her place, and the whole party waxed merrier and noisier for her presence.

“All the ladies had got their shoes off, and most of the men,” the girl remarked demurely.

George looked at her with a sudden interest. The white muslin frock, which looked so cheap and simple to his masculine eyes because it was really so expensive and perfect, the blue sash and string of pearls round her neck, all made her seem so much sweeter, and more like what Petronel ought to have been, that he hardly believed she could really be so different.

“Doesn’t she look pretty to-night?” Lady Merivale asked him, with pride.

And George was able truthfully to say that she did.

When at last the ladies rose to go, there was great consternation, for, when under the table, Petronel had quietly changed all the shoes, and nobody could find their own again. This joke met with great approbation.

“She is a sharper!” exclaimed her father proudly.

“How dare you tamper with your mother’s shoes?” cried her ladyship. “Nobody ever did have such naughty children as I!”

“Why don’t you pay her a shilling an hour to be good, too?” suggested George, who was quite hot from his share in “hunt the slipper.”

Most of the men were on their hands and knees under the table.

"My price is higher than Robin's," chimed in Petronel, with a laugh. "It would be at least a quid an hour for me."

CHAPTER IV

ALISON

Two more years glided uneventfully by, and then there came a new experience in the lives of both the Garlands and Jim Cary. It was the coming of Alison.

Mrs. Garland looked up from a letter she was reading one morning and solemnly remarked:

“Major Royse is dead.”

“Oh, Mother! How sad!” exclaimed Lavinia.

“As I never saw the man in my life I am not overpowered with grief,” continued the old lady; “but the fact is, it affects Alison. I suppose I shall have to take her.”

Lavinia’s pale face flushed with sudden excitement.

“Do you mean we shall have her to live here, Mother? Oh, that would be delightful!”

“Wait till you know the girl before you make sure of that, my dear.”

“But she is Margaret’s daughter, you see.”

“And Margaret had her faults. A more self-willed girl it would be difficult to imagine. I have no patience with people who make saints of every-

body who has died—such rubbish! But all the same this major is the last of Alison's father's people, and we must look after her now. He has left her all his money," referring again to the letter, "but that is not anything to boast of, for the Royses were a romantic, unpractical lot. Still, it makes her independent. Anyhow, my grandchild would have been welcome here had she been penniless. Poor girl! She has had few advantages—losing her mother at fifteen, and being left in the guardianship of only a man ever since."

"But she has been at school, Mother."

"And a fine pitch schools have come to nowadays! Teaching no end of fal-lals such as Latin and algebra, and leaving girls ignorant of how to mend their stockings or work a sampler. I have no patience with such nonsense."

"Major Royse was Charles's only brother?"

"Yes. And it is a wonder to me that he has lived so long—with an inside frizzled up into powder in that dreadful Indian climate for so many years."

"He never married, did he?"

"Not he. And there is the Royse folly coming out again. Instead of marrying some comfortable woman, who would have kept his house clean and his linen mended, he was for ever hankering after a ridiculous slip of a girl who died before she knew the difference between butter and dripping. I remember Margaret's telling me all about it."

"Were they ever engaged?" asked Lavinia, with interest.

"Engaged, yes! But what does that matter when one of them is dead! I was disgusted with this Royse man's wasting his life in such a manner, when the world is full of good women who would have been willing to marry and see to him for the rest of his days. It is a marvel to me—the unselfishness of women; so glib to take 'for better, for worse.' If I had written the service I should have left the 'better' out of it altogether, for with a man it generally ends in the 'for worse.'"

"How sad it seems that it should be so!" in a mournful voice.

For Lavinia never thought of disbelieving whatever platitudes her mother might lay before her.

"I wonder what kind of girl Alison has become?" mused her grandmother. "The last time I saw her she was a wild little creature, with most disgracefully rough hair and big brown eyes. But that was many years ago."

"She must be between three- and four-and-twenty now. It will be very nice for me having her as a companion. For you see, Mother, there are many things which I am interested in with which I do not like to trouble you, and which James really cannot understand, such as crochet patterns and new wool-work designs, or my preserve making. But with my own niece it will be different. Being a girl she will share my interests."

"That is as may be, Lavinia. I have no confi-

dence in a girl who has had the misfortune to be brought up by a man, and especially if she has anything of her mother's spirit. Margaret was a shocking needlewoman to the day of her death. And the Roysees have always been a queer lot."

"It was very sad that the girl Major Royse was engaged to should have died," said Lavinia, referring to the former theme.

"My dear, the ways of Providence are for the best," exclaimed her mother, with that ready resignation so many of us feel concerning the sorrows of other people. "And it would have been a very unsuitable match, I have heard, as she was a great deal too young for him, and had no money either. So, doubtless things turned out for the best. Only it was a pity he could not accept the workings of Providence in a proper spirit instead of harping on his loss for the rest of his days. I don't call it Christian behaviour myself."

"What don't you call Christian behaviour, Mrs. Garland?" asked a cheery voice at the window, for Jim Cary had come up in time to hear the end of the sentence.

"Oh, James!" cried Lavinia, "here is such a piece of news! My sister's little girl is coming to live with us!"

"You forget she is grown up by now, my dear," corrected Mrs. Garland. "But it is true, James. My granddaughter's guardian is dead, and so Alison must make her home with us for the future."

"And where does the unchristian behaviour

come in?" persisted the doctor, who always enjoyed hearing Mrs. Garland propound her views.

"That is in connection with her late guardian and uncle," the old lady explained. "He wasted his life mourning over the death of a girl he was, but never ought to have been, engaged to."

"Do you mean he gave up all his work?" asked Jim, with a twinkle in his eye.

"I should think not! Why, what are you thinking of, James? The Royses were a romantic, sentimental lot, but they were good soldiers all the same, and could stick to their colours."

"Then how did he waste his life?"

"By hankering after what Providence had denied him, to be sure. I have no sympathy with such folk."

"But I expect he loved her, Mrs. Garland. And he thought, perhaps, the life also is not wasted that is well lost for love."

"Don't quote poetry to me, James. I never could stand it. Give me something practical, I say. Why, when I lost my poor husband I accepted my experience as in the ways of Providence, and I have been very comfortable in consequence ever since. Of course, it is upsetting at first, no one will deny; but it is a mistake, if not a sin, to hanker overmuch."

Jim Cary thought of the deceased doctor, who was one of the least important pieces of furniture in the Old House, and had hardly left his own study empty; and then he pictured the girl who had gone

out of Major Royse's life, and left the whole world empty by her going, and he smiled half-sadly at the contrast.

"Poor chap," he said slowly.

"Oh, James, he was a major!" explained Lavinia, with a touch of correction in her voice.

Jim laughed. Lavinia often wondered why her lover laughed so often at the things she said quite seriously, but she supposed it was one of the inexplicable ways of men.

"It will be nice for you to have a girl companion, Lavinia. I am so glad this niece of yours is coming."

Somehow Jim had never realised the fact that Lavinia was so much older than in those first long-ago days when they became engaged. She had settled down into one of the habits of his life, and time seemed to stand still in that far-away Devonshire village. Each day was full of interest to Jim—the growing interest of his profession and his untiring efforts to fight for the lives of his poor patients, and to give them his best help. The beauty of the country round brought him abundant recreation, for Jim had an artist's love of colour as well as a sailor's love of the sea; and so the days and weeks and seasons crept on unawares, and the doctor never noticed the silver streaks that were robbing Lavinia's hair of its golden lustre, and the little lines that wrote the story of many winters on her smooth face. His own buoyant health and youthful nature were untouched by the sum of so many years, and

he felt a keener delight than ever in the realms of literature and art, to which he turned with so much zest after a hard day's work in his profession. But with Lavinia life had grown in the other direction—narrower instead of wider, smaller instead of larger. She had settled down to the happy humdrum of every day, and in that she was perfectly content. But time that seems to stand still is yet obeying its underlying tendency. As one who sits on the deck of some great ship in the midst of a smooth, pathless sea is really being taken ever onward, so on the days which seem to have the same horizon line, the same ripples, and which leave no track behind, we are still being carried onward, whether our faces be turned back toward the home of our birth, or forward looking out for fresh lands ahead.

For many days the Old House was in a state of confusion preparing for Alison's coming. The spotlessly clean rooms were ruthlessly re-cleaned, and Lavinia's nimble fingers made new muslin curtains, and more pincushions and mats and draperies than her niece could possibly have worn out in a lifetime. An extra man was hired to work in the garden, so that the grass-borders should all have their fringes cut, and every weed be plucked from the paths. Then Lavinia began her cake-making and baking with that happy interest of preparation for a new-comer which makes all such work a pleasurable excitement rather than a drudgery or bore.

When the great day arrived that was to bring

Alison to Barnscombe, poor Lavinia had such a bad sick headache that she could hardly crawl from her room; and as it was against Mrs. Garland's principles to go out as far as the station after tea, Jim Cary was deputed to meet the girl and bring her home to the Old House. And Alison, sitting at the open window, drinking in the beauty of the west country, wondered who the tall, well-dressed, soldierly man was whom the train overtook as it glided into the little wayside station.

"There is a squire at Barnscombe, I suppose," she thought as she collected her things; "what a distinguished-looking man he is!"

And then Jim Cary came up to her and introduced himself, and Alison decided that her aunt Lavinia was a very lucky person indeed.

"Will you drive down or walk?" he asked. "The luggage will go in a cart."

"Oh, walk, please! I have been fastened up in a train all day long, and I should so love a walk."

"Are you going to like Devonshire, Miss Royse?"

"I am sure that I am. You see my home in the north was so bleak and cold, and all the country round was slate-coloured. This seems so perfectly lovely, and the air is so fresh and sweet and soft."

"Barnscombe is the prettiest place in the whole world; but then so are lots of other places that people call home."

"I came here once before, when I was quite

little," continued the girl, "and I can remember what a huge garden Grannie had. There was a great hill in it somewhere."

Jim Cary smiled.

"You won't find that hill quite so big as it used to be."

"Has it grown smaller?" she wanted to know.

"No; but you have grown bigger. It comes to the same thing."

"Is Grannie strict now? She used to be."

"Yes, rather. But you are not afraid of strictness?"

"What makes you think so?" asked Alison eagerly.

The doctor looked at her keenly. She was a tall, well-built girl, with a ridiculously small head, and a bright, sweet childish face that was quite out of keeping with her five foot eight. But Jim Cary liked her looks, and the incongruities of her appearance appealed to him.

"She is a boy now; but she will be a woman some day," he thought to himself. Aloud he said, "It would take a good deal of strictness to frighten you, I think."

"I have had a good deal the last few years of my life," she answered, and a wistful look flashed across her sunny face. "They were strict at school, and my uncle was strict, too, though very kind to me in his own way."

"I am sorry you have lost him," said Jim.

"He was a very sad man," and the girl's voice

softened, "for he had a great sorrow in his life which never healed. I can't help feeling glad to think that it is all right at last with him now."

Her companion was silent. He did not know how to speak of those things.

"I am so looking forward to belonging to my mother's people," continued Alison.

"They are very much looking forward to having you. Lavinia is quite ill to-day with over-excitement, or she would have come with me to meet you."

Alison looked up quickly at the doctor. She was deeply interested in the romantic side of life, and she felt that an engaged person was standing on holy ground which she herself hardly dared approach.

Jim Cary caught her look and smiled.

"Lavinia will be very good to you," he said; "indeed we all shall."

The girl's big brown eyes filled with tears.

"Thank you," she said softly. "It is very good of you to say that. For you see I have left my old home, and I haven't come to my new one yet, and it is a bit lonely by one's self on the way between."

"Poor child!" he answered, with a ring of tenderness in his voice. "But look, we have reached home now, and you sha'n't be lonely any more."

And Mrs. Garland came hurrying down the garden path with outstretched arms, Lavinia following at her heels; and between them they kissed and

cried over each other for a few minutes so heartily that Alison felt that her mother's home was indeed hers, and that she never need be homeless any more. Then Jim Cary reappeared, having mysteriously effaced himself during this little scene, and they laughed with wet eyes and happy faces, and then all went in to supper.

"It is simply perfect!" exclaimed Alison, as they took their seats at the well-spread table; "I could hardly come down for hanging out of my bedroom window to get a glimpse of the sea."

"I am glad you are pleased, my dear," said Mrs. Garland graciously.

"It is an extremely pretty neighbourhood," chimed in Lavinia; "a tourist told me so last week."

"We know that without tourists' opinions," said the doctor. "I have looked at its beauty for over forty years, and have not seen a quarter of it yet."

"And the air smells so sweet," continued Alison; "I noticed a difference directly I came into Devonshire."

"Let me help you to some junket, my dear?" said her grandmother; and then, turning to her daughter, "Lavinia, you are eating nothing."

"My headache is so bad, Mother."

"You do look very far from well, Lavinia," said the doctor sympathetically. Indeed, he was quite struck by the frailty of Lavinia's appearance. True, she was specially pale, and being wrapped up in a white woollen shawl gave her an invalid look;

but it was the fresh young face on the opposite side of the table that made Lavinia look so faded and worn. Jim Cary had not noticed it until it was emphasised by the contrast.

"Do let us go out," begged Alison, as they rose from the table. "It is still quite light."

"I do not feel equal to doing so," sighed Lavinia.

"James will show you round, my dear," said the old lady. "The fresh air will do you good after such a long journey."

"Here it is," exclaimed the doctor, standing by a little mound round an oak tree on the lawn.

"Is this really the big hill I remember running up and down?" asked Alison incredulously.

"It is difficult to realise; but it is. Size is only a relative thing, you see, after all."

"I wonder whether Uncle William is looking at the mountain of his life's trouble now, and smiling to see how really small it was," said the girl dreamily; and then, with a sudden change of expression, she cried in boyish delight: "Oh! There is a kingfisher down by the stream! Do let us go and find his nest."

"I shall not let you rob it," said Jim Cary absently.

He was wondering how many opposite moods were hidden in the girl's character. Alison looked up with a dash of defiance.

"Perhaps you could not prevent me," she observed, tossing her head.

"Perhaps also I could," replied Jim, with a smile.

"How?"

"I am not going to tell you that—now."

"But you think you could?" she asked again.

"I am sure of it."

"You don't know how difficult I am to manage," she replied, with her chin in the air.

"Neither do you know how masterful a man I can be."

"I think perhaps I might guess," and Alison looked up demurely through her eyelashes; "for, do you know? you seem to me much stricter than Grannie."

"Lavinia would not say so. I am considered very indulgent to people."

"Are you going to be very indulgent to me, Dr. Cary?"

"I don't think I am," he answered, half-smiling.

"Why not?"

"Oh, because you are different, somehow."

"You are awfully different from what I expected," continued the girl, glancing at him critically.

"What kind of man did you expect?"

"Tell me if I am what you expected first?"

"Not in the very least. I thought you would be more like your aunt. But I never imagined any one in the least like you, so no wonder I was mistaken."

"You don't know much about me yet."

"I beg your pardon, Miss Royse, but I think I do. I have not been studying people physically and mentally for so many years without its sharpening my vision."

"What do you know about me?" she asked, with interest.

"That you are a bundle of incongruities. What they all are I have not yet discovered, but a few of them I have already found out."

"You are very clever," said Alison, with a laugh.

They stood together looking over a gate which opened into a field flecked with cowslips, and shaded by the rich foliage of a dozen stately trees.

"What a wealth of colour!" the girl exclaimed in ecstasy. And he saw her mood was changing again under the subtle influence of that patch of meadow beauty.

"I am glad you have an eye for colour," observed Jim reflectively; "it means the loss of so much to live in Devonshire without it. Or indeed anywhere, I suppose, for the matter of that."

"I should like so much to be an artist that I know I never can be one," she continued enigmatically.

"I see what you mean. You realise how great a thing it is to even try to interpret Nature—so great that nothing less than genius dare attempt it. But we can see what we could not possibly portray. And it is a good thing, if not a great one, to be able to see it."

"Isn't it wonderful how independent a thing genius is of people!" said Alison thoughtfully. "It flashes through them from some divine source, and yet leaves them untouched in themselves."

"You mean that genius does not improve a person as talent does, though it is so much greater a thing?" replied the doctor, with ready interest.

"Yes. A vulgar man, though he be a genius, will still be a vulgar man; but a man of talent will be improved as he improves his talents."

"Talent, I suppose, is more part of a man's self."

"Yes, and therefore infinitely inferior to genius, for that is part of God," answered the girl reverently.

Jim Cary looked down with almost wonder at her eager, earnest face.

"If it be, as you say, a part of God," he asked gently, "why does it not lift the man far higher than any talents possibly could?"

"I suppose because it is only from the outside," replied Alison, with rather a puzzled look, "and it is the inside things which really influence and alter and elevate people, don't you think?"

"I never thought about it before, I am afraid," and Jim looked a little grave.

"You have had so many other things to think of," said the girl readily. "So many realities to fight against in your profession that you could not have had much time for abstract ideas."

The doctor's face brightened.

"I could have found time if I had wanted to," he replied; "but I have always taken certain things for granted, and thought more about the doing than the being in life."

"I think it is right for men to do so, because they chiefly have the doing of the world's work."

"Then you are not one of the modern women who think that they ought to do full half, if not three-quarters, of the work which old-fashioned people believed only men could do." And the doctor smiled at the idea of the girl beside him being a typical modern woman.

"I am one of the old-fashioned people myself," she answered, "and I still believe that men can do things far better than we can, because they are stronger and cleverer and bigger, somehow, altogether. But I also think that perhaps we can *be* things better, and that being womanly and sweet, and gentle, and helpful, and sympathetic is more our work than doing a heap of business; though I know it is terribly primitive to think so in these days."

"Then be terribly primitive," said Jim quickly.

"It won't matter in Devonshire if I am?" and Alison laughed brightly.

They had been climbing the hill at the back of the garden, and a wonderful panorama of country stretched before them, steeped in the mauve light of the fading day. The sea lay light and glassy against the hazy horizon line, and the thin crescent of a new moon was creeping up from behind the

distant hills. The colours which had looked so vivid only a short time before were melting into a more sombre hue, and the stillness wrapped all the landscape in its hush.

"You are tired," said the doctor, looking at Alison's face, suddenly paled in the twilight. "You must go indoors now."

"I am a little," she owned; "it has been such a long day. The days are long, you know, on which you pass through a new experience."

"Good-night," he said, clasping her hand in his strong, warm grasp at the hall-door; "I hope you will be very happy here."

"I am sure I shall," she replied simply, lifting her starry eyes to his. "It is all so sweet and home-like, and you are all so good to me."

That night as Jim Cary sat over his pipe he thought a great deal of Alison Royse. He had enjoyed his talk with her so much, and he felt a keen admiration for the girl's looks and ways and ever-varying moods. She was so different to all the women he had met before, and yet he could not classify her as being specially of this or that type.

"She was so boyish every now and then," he thought to himself, as he went over the evening they had spent together, "that I wanted to tease and scold her, and then there came a flash of womanly depth and tenderness that made me feel as if I ought to stand bare-headed in her presence. I was right when I called her a bundle of incon-

gruities—but what a charming bundle, all the same!”

And some of Alison’s last waking thoughts were of the doctor:

“I like him awfully—he is so big and strong and manly. I wonder whether he could master me? I shall see one of these days, though I expect he can if he tries. There are not many things he could not do if he tried, I imagine. Of course he must be very old to be engaged to Aunt Lavinia—but he doesn’t seem too old to talk to. I shall like to have him as an uncle,” and she smiled sleepily.

“Oh, Mother!” said Lavinia, pausing with her candle in Mrs. Garland’s room, “isn’t she sweet? And yet so tall and bright-looking. Her eyes are perfectly lovely—like a stag’s—and I don’t mind her having a turn-up nose, do you?”

“Not much use our minding what is ready-made,” observed the old lady; “and though she has not your regular features, Lavinia, she will not do badly with that mouth and complexion. Her mother was the same, with a nose that I was always ashamed of, seeing my own is so straight, but with the sweetest possible mouth to make up, as it were, for what went before. But Alison gets her eyes from her father. There were no brown eyes in our family—I never liked them,” as if that were the sole reason for their non-appearance among the Garlands; “for they seem to me an inhuman colour and one more suited to the animals who have them than to reasonable beings such as ourselves.”

“Of course I agree with you, Mother, in preferring blue or gray; blue always seems to me the most womanly colour—but,” apologetically, “I could not help admiring Alison’s for brown ones. They are so much larger and deeper than usual.”

“She is a nice-looking girl,” said Mrs. Garland, “and reminded me of her mother several times, especially with that toss of the head which always means a defiant spirit, as it was in Margaret’s case, but which I am not going to stand in her daughter. The girl may not have had any training till now, but it is not too late. And, if she is too rebellious for me, I have James to fall back upon.”

“But I did not think she seemed at all inclined to be rebellious, Mother.”

“Ah, my dear, new brooms sweep clean! But do not think I am not pleased with the girl, Lavinia, for indeed I am. Only Margaret’s child and my granddaughter is too good an article to be spoiled for lack of necessary severity. It quite renews my youth, the thought of bringing up Alison. You were finished so long ago, Lavinia.”

“Yes, Mother,” very meekly.

Lavinia did not quite know whether she was being blamed or commended for the finished state of her upbringing.

Alison’s coming made a great difference at the Old House. Her bright, merry presence filled every room, and there was more fun and laughter then than during the whole stretch of years since her mother was young and at home. She was in-

terested in everything, and eager to learn whatever her aunt and grandmother could teach her. Her love of the country round Barnscombe delighted all the inhabitants thereof; and she made friends with every man, woman, and child in the village.

“I be right glad, miss,” said the postman, “when I have a letter for you as well as all t’other folks. For to my thinking the day begins well with a letter—it gives a relish, like a radish with one’s tea.”

“But sometimes a letter gives us indigestion, as the radish would my grandmother,” replied Alison, with a smile. She often met Benjamin Wedge at the wicket gate, and took the letters from him there, after a little talk.

“True, miss. But folks as give up eating this and that for fear o’ the indigestion lose a lot of pleasure, to my thinking. For fearful folks are not the happy ones. When I was a little lad my mother used to say, ‘Say your prayers, Benny, mornin’ and night, and between whiles be as good and as happy as you can, and fear nothing, for it will be all right.’ I often think on it, miss. She was a rare good woman, was mother!”

“Mothers generally are,” said the girl softly, and there was a ring of sadness in her voice.

Jim Cary found that Alison’s coming made a great difference also to him. The society of the Old House was so much more lively than it used to be, and she discussed so many subjects with him which Lavinia could only listen to, that his visits there be-

came of a much more vivid colour in his life. Soon, however, there arose a considerable bone of contention between them, and that was Alison's persistent refusal to join in the walks which Lavinia and the doctor were accustomed to take on summer evenings after tea. Her aunt begged her to do so, for Lavinia rather feared the long *tête-à-têtes* with her lover, and found the talks which Alison led so much pleasanter to listen to. Jim Cary asked her over and over again to come, and showed considerable annoyance at her ever-ready excuses. He had had so many walks with Lavinia, and after he had told her of his day's work there was so little left to talk about. But the girl continued firm, and would always be off somewhere by herself in spite of their united entreaties.

One lovely July evening, a couple of months after Alison's arrival at Barnscombe, Jim and Lavinia started as usual, Alison being nowhere to be found.

"She did not come in to tea even," explained her aunt. "I hope nothing has happened to her."

"What could happen to her?" replied Jim quickly. "What a ridiculous idea, Lavinia! Hasn't she stayed out as late as this heaps of times before?"

"Oh, yes! Of course, there is no real danger, James, but I am so nervous."

"There is always danger when a wilful girl is alone by the sea," he replied, somewhat inconsist-

ently. "I hope to goodness she has not gone out in a boat!"

"She would never dream of doing such a thing; Mother has forbidden it."

"I am not so sure of that. Alison is not made of such obedient stuff as you are, Lavinia."

"Let us go down to the shore and look for her," she suggested; and she could hardly keep up with the doctor's long strides as they turned seawards.

"Have you had an interesting day, James?" she asked, a little breathlessly, as he walked on in silence.

"No—yes, I mean. Mrs. Benbow is not quite so well, but I think— What time did you say Alison went out?"

"It was quite late when she started; she stayed to wind Mother's wool. And now I remember, James, she took some cut-rounds with her, so she would be sure not to come back to tea."

"Then why didn't you tell me so before?" impatiently. "I was afraid she had got into some mischief."

"Oh, James, I am so sorry! Please do not be vexed with me!"

"I am not vexed, Lavinia. Why ever should I be?"

"You spoke a little sternly," she added timidly; "but I did not mean to worry you."

"It is all right, my dear; but you know your responsibilities are mine also—and Alison is a great responsibility."

"Yet she is very sweet, James, don't you think?"

"She is a difficult girl to manage," he continued, ignoring her question. "Your mother was talking to me about her the other day."

"She is a little wilful at times," said Lavinia, with a sigh. "But, James, I wanted to consult you. Can you tell me how much more red-currant jelly you think I ought to preserve than in other years when we were only two in family?"

"I don't know. What does she do that is wilful, Lavinia?"

"I cannot recall any exact instance, but she seems to have her own way a good deal more than Mother thinks a young girl should. Mrs. Fane considers an extra dozen would be enough, because, you see, James, when the mould is once turned out two people would practically eat as much as three. I mean, the jelly cannot be put back or saved till another time. That is the worst of preserves in moulds. It runs to a little extravagance."

"Isn't that a straw hat?" exclaimed Jim, catching sight of something white among the sand-hills.

"It is Alison's white sailor hat, I feel sure. Can you see whether it has a black ribbon round it from here? Kathleen Fane always wears a sailor hat, but she has a striped band round hers."

Now when we have been frightened about a person we are apt to feel excessively angry instead of thankful when we greet them safe and sound. So

the doctor's voice was very stern as, coming up to Alison, he said :

"Wherever have you been? Your aunt has had quite a fright about you."

"About me!" exclaimed the girl, amazed. "Why, I told Grannie I should be out to tea!"

"Mother did not mention it to me," said Lavinia. "Or stop, I believe she did say something of the kind, but I did not take it in at the time."

"I am so sorry, dear," and the girl took her aunt's arm; "but I wanted to have a bathe, you know."

"Didn't you bathe this morning?" asked Jim.

"Yes; before breakfast."

"Then you had no business to bathe again."

"Why not, I should like to know?"

"Because it will make you ill. And if it does, I will send you to bed for a week, and you won't like that."

Alison laid her hand on his arm.

"Please don't be so angry with me! I did not mean to vex anybody. It seems unexpectedly to have turned out naughty, as some of the things used to do when I was a child. Why, Aunt Vinnie, what is the matter?" as she saw Lavinia wipe away a tear.

"I cannot bear to hear James address you so severely," explained her aunt; "it quite upsets me."

"Oh, it is all right, dear!" said her niece. "He isn't going to be angry with me any more—are

you?" looking up at him with a pleading face, but twinkling eyes.

"Well, not this time," he promised; "but don't go frightening us any more. And you must walk home with us now, whether you like it or not."

"Very well," said the girl submissively, and they all three turned back towards the village.

"I have been wondering, Alison," began Lavinia, "how much extra currant jelly your being at the Old House this year will involve. James can give me no idea."

"I should think not! Neither can I."

"The currants are ready for picking now," mused her aunt, and then a silence fell upon the trio as they skirted the sand-hills and climbed the crumbling cliff.

"Tell me what it is," exclaimed Alison, after they had stood for a few minutes at the top looking seawards, "that makes one so sad in the presence of such great beauty as this?"

"Do you feel sad?" And Lavinia's voice was full of sympathy. "Well, you have had your troubles, and your recent bereavement would quite account for it, my dear."

"Oh, no! not that sadness. But the kind that comes as if we saw in this beauty of Nature some glimpse of a happiness we are hungry for, but cannot yet reach. Don't you know what I mean?" appealing to the doctor.

"Yes. I think I do. But it should bring glad-

ness, too; for is it not a promise as well as only a passing vision?"

"I never thought of that," said Alison. "It is a beautiful idea. And the sadness is of so sweet a kind that it is perhaps just at the turn of the true happiness."

"But, Alison," interposed Lavinia, "happiness and sadness are just the opposite of each other, and the same circumstances could not create both."

"Oh, but they could, Aunt Vinnie, and generally do. Happiness and sadness are as near akin as humour and pathos, and continually touch."

"I do not understand you, my dear," and her aunt looked puzzled.

"Well, don't you know how when one is most happy—in the best and deep sense of course I mean—there always comes a wave of sadness, too? It is like the shadow of earth on happiness which is really of Heaven."

"But I was not thinking of religious matters," Lavinia explained, "but just of earthly happiness."

"I don't believe that true happiness is ever earthly," said Alison simply.

"Oh, my dear! What an extraordinary thing to say, and so unnatural in a girl of your age! There is indeed much happiness in many things that are not distinctly religious."

"But I did not say religious in your sense of the word, Aunt Vinnie. I only meant that all the great happiness in life is eternal—and that which stretches beyond death catches its passing shadow,

don't you see? Pleasure, and purely temporal things of course would not."

"But a fine evening is not eternal," argued Lavinia.

"Beauty is," said Alison, with a smile, "and so are love and friendship and goodness and knowledge, and all the things that make life full and rich and glad."

"I cannot grasp new ideas," and Lavinia gave a little sigh; "they seem to upset me. I have always felt that religion was reading the Bible and saying one's prayers and teaching in the Sunday-school and going to church, not in the things that you speak of, my dear. Do not you agree with me, James?"

The doctor's face was very grave.

"I do, and I do not. You see I was brought up as you have been, Lavinia, to believe that religion wholly existed in the things you mention—and, if that was so, it had not much hold upon my life. But what Alison says, though new to me, is the religion that most men want."

"Life is made up of six days to the week and only one Sunday," Alison interposed.

"I do not quite see what you mean by that?" asked Lavinia. "You have such a perplexing way of talking at times."

Then as they had come to the village, the subject dropped and they all went in to supper.

"My dear," said Lavinia timidly, coming into her niece's room late that night, "I am so sorry that

James spoke so severely to you out on the shore. It was so unlike him, for I have never heard him do so before. I hope you will not let it fret you."

"Oh, no!" answered the girl, smiling. "I don't mind."

"But my dear, you should mind. I did not mean that. Only now it is over do not dwell upon it."

"Dr. Cary is rather down on me," said Alison musingly.

"I am afraid he is a little. But it is only for your good, I am sure. Still, it is very unlike James to be so. He has always been so very indulgent to me."

"You are so good, you know, dear," and Alison kissed her. "Nobody could scold you."

"Oh, you are mistaken! Mother often does. And I am far from being good. Still, you see, James is engaged to me, and I expect that makes the difference. It makes him a kind of uncle to you, and so he feels it his duty, no doubt, to try to train you, and that renders him a little stern."

"I like him all the better for that, Aunt Vinnie, so don't let it worry you."

"I am not really able to think that you can," exclaimed Lavinia; "it would be so terrible to me to be spoken so sternly to by James."

"Masterfulness always appeals to me."

"Well, Alison, you are a strange girl. I can-

not understand you one bit. But it is very nice having you here; it makes the house so bright and cheerful."

"Thank you, dear. You are all so good to me," and Alison kissed her aunt a very warm good-night.

CHAPTER V

THE PICNIC

WHEN the summer days were shortening into early autumn, and the harvesters were busy in every field, Barnscombe Court was suddenly filled to overflowing. The family had been in London and abroad, ever since Alison came to the Old House, and it was with much interest that she looked forward to meeting the great people of the neighbourhood, about whom she had already heard so much.

“Petronel is several years younger than you,” Lavinia explained to her niece, “but she has had this season in London since she was presented, so I daresay you will find her quite grown-up.”

And Alison soon discovered that her aunt spoke truly, for Petronel Merrivale was indeed better versed in the ways of the world at eighteen than Alison would be at twenty-eight. She had been to more balls in her first season than many girls attend during a lifetime, and there had not been a single smart function during the last six months at which Lady Merrivale and her beautiful daughter were not present. For as regards beauty Petronel had more than fulfilled the promise of her youth.

"Whatever do you find to do down here?" that young lady asked Alison on the occasion of their first meeting. "I find it so awfully dull."

"I am never dull if the sea is within reach," replied Alison. "I bathe and boat and fish, and simply love being down on the shore."

"Mummy won't let me go and do any of those things because of my complexion," said Petronel, with a sigh. "Isn't it a bore? At Cowes she made me wear a white veil and always have a parasol, and even then I got three freckles. She was so angry."

Alison laughed.

"Sea air is very unbecoming, I am afraid."

"But Devonshire air isn't. Mummy says it is owing to my having lived in Devonshire when I was a kid, and being always out of doors in the soft, damp air, that has given me my complexion. She says when I am married she shall wash her hands of it once and for all, but till then I must be careful. That is why she won't let me hunt or shoot now as I used to before I came out."

"How funny! What do you like doing best?"

"Dancing. We are going to Cannes for the winter, and to Monte Carlo, too, I hope. I hate being here in the country for long."

"You have lots of people staying in the house now, haven't you? There was such a crowd in the Court pew on Sunday. I was deeply interested."

"And most of the men stayed at home, so there are more still."

"It must be very jolly. Like a party at every meal. I have never stayed in a big houseful."

"How frightfully funny!" exclaimed Petronel. "There were twenty in the house where we stayed for Ascot, and there was an enormous house-party for the Dublin Horse Show, and quite a lot for Goodwood. I only came out in February, you know, so I haven't had much experience."

"You have had much more than I have, anyway," replied Alison. "Tell me who were the two men who did appear on Sunday?"

"What were they like? I forget."

"One was fair and rather effeminate, a shortish man with poor shoulders."

"Oh, he is Claud Curtis, an artist. He is going to make no end of sketches down here, I believe. But I don't talk much to him. I hate artists."

"Hate artists!" exclaimed Alison. "Whatever for?"

"They generally wear such odious collars, and talk about things that bore me. Besides, I know one artist—a really great one, an R.A., and all that, you know—who is horrid to me. He painted my portrait when I was quite small, but he is not a bit nice now. I have met him at several places this season."

"The other was a tall, lean, dark man, with very capable hands."

"That is Sammy Head."

"Not the cricketer?"

"Yes, rather! Do you know him?"

"No, only by name. But I am awfully interested in cricket. Dr. Cary and I have watched all the scores this season. Some of them have been splendid. I should like to know him!"

"Well, you will meet him up here. He is very amusing. Robin simply adores him."

"Is Robin your little brother?"

"Yes. He went back to school yesterday. He is going on to the Britannia next year."

"I did not know Mr. Head's name was Sammy."

"It isn't. His name is Stafford Clive Cornwallis, that is why he is called Sammy for short." And Petronel smiled lazily as she leaned back in her long basket chair on the lawn.

Alison was sitting on the grass at her feet, and she looked up admiringly at the girl's beautiful face and head, and was not surprised that Lady Merrivale was careful of such a flower-like complexion.

"Did you go to the 'Varsity match?" she asked Petronel eagerly.

"Yes. I had a new Paris frock for the occasion. It was great fun—all except the cricket."

"Except the cricket!" exclaimed Alison. "What do you mean?"

"That is the worst of all cricket matches," continued Petronel; "it takes up all the men, and it is so stupid just to sit beside one's mother and look on! Of course there are other men at Lord's, but I wanted to talk to Sammy and several of the men

who were in the eleven, and it was so tiresome their having to play."

"I like to watch the game," said Alison, "and I get most frightfully excited."

"You are rather a boyish girl," said Petronel, looking at her critically; "the men were right."

"What men?" said Alison quickly.

"Oh, Claud Curtis and Lord Archie and Sammy; they went for a walk along the cliffs yesterday, and they said they had seen a tall girl down on the shore throwing stones exactly like a boy. I thought it must be you."

"I was making ducks-and-drakes," Alison explained. "Isn't it funny how impossible it is to stand down by the sea without throwing stones into it?"

"I never do since I grew up. You seem to me awfully young."

"I am not then. But I don't feel a bit older than I did when I was twelve, only of course one knows more about things."

"Oh, here is Sammy!" cried Petronel, with sudden animation. "I have been explaining you to Miss Royse, and she adores and understands cricket."

"How wonderfully intelligent of her!" answered the young man. He spoke in a well-bred, drawling kind of way, which Alison liked to hear.

"I have read so much about you," she said, with a smile, "that it is like meeting a picture out of the Illustrated or Sketch to see you in the flesh."

"The worst of those portraits is," he interrupted gravely, "that they are in black and white, and so you lose my colouring. Now, colouring has always been my strong point. They used to tell me so at school, so I know it is true."

The girls both laughed as they looked at his absolutely pale face and perfectly-matched dark hair and eyes.

"It seems to me you would simply shine in black and white," said Petronel.

"There you do me an injustice, Miss Merri-vale. I have a sweet blush at times—but no artist can really paint a blush, I have often heard. And it has been proved true in my case."

"Have you not had your portrait painted?" Alison wanted to know.

"Well, not exactly. A cove has painted some big cricketing picture for the Colonies, I believe, and he wrote the other day to ask me to send him my colouring."

"What did you say?" asked Petronel.

"I told him my hair was scarlet and my eyes a vivid blue, and that my cheeks were fresh-coloured to put it mildly. I am thinking of emigrating," he continued, in his slow way, "so that I may meet that picture some day."

"How foolish you are!" said Petronel reprovingly; "it will spoil the whole thing."

"I thought it would be more cheerful for the Colonies," continued Sammy. "It is a pity to depress a country in its youth. And my counte-

nance, when unadorned, is not exhilarating, you know."

"What a goose you are!" and Petronel tapped him with her parasol.

"I see you know how to throw stones," he said, turning to Alison. "Do you live in a glass house, or have you any brothers?"

"Neither," she answered, with a laugh. "But I am very proud that you commend my throwing."

"Can you also catch? I am going to teach Miss Merrivale how to catch a ball when she has taught me how to knit a stocking."

"It will be very difficult to teach a man how to knit a stocking," exclaimed Alison.

"Neither will it be easy to teach Miss Merrivale how to catch a ball—even a soft one. With a hard one it would be impossible."

"It hurts so," Petronel interrupted.

"So do most things before we do them well," added Alison.

"I met a very smart old cove down in the village," began Sammy, after lighting a cigarette; "looked like a soldier, and his tie was immaculate."

"That is Dr. Cary," said Alison quickly, and she felt a sudden wave of dislike for the cricketer that he should dare to call Jim Cary "an old cove."

"He is coming to our picnic to-morrow, and so are you too, I hope. Mummy has written to invite you, Miss Royse."

"I shall be delighted. How kind of Lady Merrivale!"

"Dr. Cary is the best shot Father ever has down here," Petronel continued. "We all like him immensely. I suppose you see a great deal of him?" turning to Alison.

"Oh, yes! He is engaged to my aunt, you know."

"Lord Archie has just pressed upon me the most preposterous invitation a man ever received," said Sammy Head. "He actually wanted me to go and shoot with him for two days at his island, or some such place where he has a shoot, about half-way between here and the North Pole. It will take me about a fortnight to get there and back—and for two days only!"

"How ridiculous!" exclaimed Petronel. "Of course you are not going?"

"Yes, I am. It is ridiculous, isn't it? I have been thinking so ever since."

"Then why are you?" queried Alison.

"Because I shall enjoy it, of course. Could a chap have a better reason?"

"Do you remember the first time we met?" said Petronel, after a few moments' pause. "It was at a naughty little secret dance Lady Worfield gave in Lent."

"Yes, I know. It was against my principles going. I am awfully strict about Lent, Miss Royse. I always give up something."

"What did you give up last Lent?" asked Alison smiling.

"A little of the water in my whisky. But my

brother is stricter still; he gave up going to the office. It led to rather an unpleasantness with the governor, but a fellow always has to suffer for conscience' sake."

The girls laughed.

"I must be going now," said Alison, rising.

"We shall meet again to-morrow," and Petronel smiled graciously. "Remember, we start punctually at eleven."

Now a picnic is about the longest entertainment that the mind of man can devise, and approaches more nearly to eternity than any other of the transient pleasures that can be enjoyed in the realms of time. By one o'clock Alison felt as if she had known Claud Curtis, who sat next her on the coach, all her life. They had discussed art with a capital A, and almost every other subject, before luncheon, and there were still four hours before the carriages were ordered for the long homeward drive.

"What shall we play at?" asked Sammy Head, when all the men, and several of the women, had finished their cigarettes. "My nursemaid used to play a delightful game called 'I languish.' I forget the rules, but it usually ended in kissing somebody, if I remember rightly."

"Now, Sammy, don't be a naughty boy, and contaminate my picnic!" cried Lady Merrivale.

"I suppose it was of the genus of 'Kiss in the ring'?" suggested Claud.

"If they begin any rowdy, fast game, don't you join in it," said Jim Cary in a low voice to Alison.

"But all the other girls will," she argued, slightly surprised.

"I don't care about that. You are not 'all the other girls,' and I won't have it."

Alison looked up at him quickly. There was an ominous pucker between his eyebrows and a firm set of his lips which she had learned to know meant having his own way.

"All right," she replied softly. "But I can play if it is a nice game, can't I?"

"What a child you are!" and Jim smiled at her pleading eyes and coaxing voice. "Round games are stupid things."

"Oh, but they are such fun! And I have never been at a big, smart picnic like this before."

Dr. Cary shrugged his shoulders.

"You are none the worse for that," he murmured.

"It is too hot to play games," Petronel was saying; "let us go into the woods."

"In twos and threes," added somebody.

"Bags one of the twos for me," said Sammy.

Then the party broke up and drifted away, and Alison found Claud Curtis the other half of her two.

"I am going to do a sketch," he said; "won't you come and criticise and look on?"

"I am much too ignorant to criticise; but I should love to see your work," she answered enthusiastically; and soon they found what the artist called a good study, and Alison sat down on the

trunk of a fallen tree and watched him painting with admiring eyes.

"How well we understand each other," began Claud, after a long pause. "There is nothing oppressive in the silence between us, and that shows we are kindred souls."

"But I don't think there is ever anything oppressive in a silence out of doors," said Alison, "because it is not really a silence. It is just a listening to Nature."

That idea, however, was not satisfactory to the artist.

"Oh, no!" he argued; "it might be oppressive if we were not in sympathy with each other. But as it is, we are reading the same page together, even though we may be reading it to ourselves."

Alison did not speak, and Claud continued:

"I knew you had an artist's soul the first moment I saw you."

Alison remembered how Dr. Cary had said that he was glad she had an artist's eye for colour, and how pleased she had been by that simple statement. She wondered why this greater praise on similar lines made her feel slightly uncomfortable.

"You could hardly have known that," she said, with a toss of her head.

"Why not, dear lady? You do me an injustice."

"Because I have not brought my soul with me to-day," she answered mockingly. "I thought I should not want it at a picnic."

"Ah! now you are making fun," sighed Claud;

"but I see below the surface. I know that what you pretend is shallow is, in reality, deeper than you yourself know. How many men have been drowned in such deception!"

"How is your sketch getting on?" asked Alison irrelevantly.

"You must not look till it is finished," he exclaimed hurriedly. "It puts me completely off my work if any one sees my studies unfinished."

"I like to watch the quick way in which you seem to do it," and the girl's voice was full of praise; "it must be splendid to be able to draw and paint!"

"It is unsatisfactory work at best," sighed Claud, who was always in ecstasies over his own efforts, "but it is a great help to have some one near you who is content just to sit still and understand."

"That seems by far the easiest part," interrupted Alison, with a faint touch of derision in her voice.

"You think so because you can do it, Miss Royse. But it is not really so. We always think that what we ourselves can do is easy, but it is a grand mistake. No one else at this picnic could have given me the help you are giving, almost unconsciously."

"I am doing nothing," said Alison shortly.

"So you say. But is it nothing to see in Art what you see in her, and to feel that sympathy with her disciples which claims their comradeship at the

very least? It is you really who will have painted this little study of mine."

The girl laughed.

"I think you are stating the case a trifle strongly, Mr. Curtis."

The artist shook his head and worked on for a time in silence. Then he looked up and said sadly:

"You must forgive me if I am a little dull to-day," knowing perfectly well that, whatever else he might be, he was not that, "but the truth is—I feel drawn to tell you, Miss Royse—I have just had a great sorrow."

Now this was a very clever new departure on the part of Claud. He was quick to see that though Alison might laugh at admiration, she was full of sympathy for those in trouble. He had noted that she was in mourning, and he knew from observation, not experience, what a bond a common feeling of sadness brings. But all the while he did not himself know that he was playing to the gallery so patiently. He felt the longing for sympathy and appreciation, and then he suddenly remembered that he was bereaved, and for a short time his loss was a real one. Though Claud might deceive other people, he deceived himself first, and so his conduct was not altogether false. In an instant the cold touch of scorn vanished from Alison's face, and her eyes glowed with feeling.

"I am so sorry!" she said simply.

"My dearest friend has died," he murmured.

"Would you like to tell me all about it?" she asked gently.

"He was such a splendid fellow, and life was so bright before him," he continued, now thoroughly enjoying himself; for Claud loved a dramatic situation in which he was the centre figure. "We played together in the nursery, and sat at the same desk throughout all our school days; and then, though our different callings separated us for a time, our friendship, I might almost say our brotherhood, was still unbroken."

Alison did not speak, but her face was eloquent of sympathy. She knew that if sorrow is real there is so little to say; but Claud, who did not know this, was disappointed.

"Though my prospects are so poor," he continued, fully intending to be President of the Royal Academy some day, "his were brilliant. That makes his death so doubly sad. He was heir to three fortunes, and only one of them had as yet come to him."

The girl's face suddenly changed, and Claud quickly added:

"If one of us had to go, what a pity it seems that it was not I, who could have been so easily spared."

"Perhaps your creative power would have been a greater loss to the world than his spending of the remaining two fortunes," suggested Alison.

Claud felt the touch of coldness in her tone and was genuinely distressed.

"Ah, Miss Royse, I am afraid my words gave you a wrong impression? Why I regretted his loss of that money was not for his sake, but for humanity's. How nobly and unselfishly he would have given to the needy what will now be hoarded by the selfish, if not recklessly thrown away by the extravagant."

This was a slight stretch of imagination on the part of Claud, seeing that the first fortune had only helped to enrich many wealthy tradesmen and a few trainers and bookies; but he forgot this in the picture he was drawing of his lost friend for him and Alison to mourn over together.

"This is idle and perhaps foolish speculation," he continued gravely; "the bitter fact remains that I have to live on without him. But enough of me and my concerns. It is a shame to cloud the sunshine of the day for you, only you will forgive me, I know, for trusting you over much."

"There is nothing to forgive. And you know I sympathise with you."

Which was exactly what Claud was at that moment simply feeding upon.

"May I see your sketch now?" Alison asked, after a long silence.

"It is not worth showing," said Claud, who knew perfectly how extremely clever it was. Patches of light falling through the shade of the trees overhead, the rusty colour of the fading bracken, and a girl's figure seated on a fallen tree made up the picture.

"You have used my face for the girl's," exclaimed Alison. "I never gave you leave, you know."

"But you won't mind, will you?—because the whole thing is yours. I had to clothe my maiden as a village girl in apron and sunbonnet because, much as I admire your coat and skirt and sailor hat in reality, they would not have done for art."

Alison laughed.

"It is awfully clever of you to make the girl me, nevertheless. I suppose you wanted a copy for the face?"

"I wanted your face to copy," he replied, folding up his painting materials.

"I wish I could sketch like that!" and Alison looked admiringly at the block in her hand.

"Let me teach you. I know I could."

The girl shook her head.

"I am afraid you could not."

"I will try, and show you that you are wrong. I shall be at the Court for another week or so, and we will see what we can do. I feel that Art is in you from the way you talk."

Alison liked the taste of the flattery just as we like that of chocolate creams, provided we do not get sick of them.

"It will be very good of you to help me," she replied gratefully.

And Claud was satisfied with his afternoon's work.

"Where have you been all this long time?" Jim Cary asked her, as they met again at tea-time.

"In the wood watching Mr. Curtis sketch. He put me in."

"Confound his impertinence!" exclaimed the doctor savagely.

Alison instantly took up the cudgels on her new friend's behalf.

"It was not impertinent. I did not mind." She forgot then that she had not been consulted. "And he gave me the sketch to do what I liked with."

"Let me see it."

"I have not got it yet. He is going to mount it for me and bring it to the Old House."

"And what will you do with it then?" he asked.

"Oh, I don't know! Give it to Grannie perhaps."

Jim Cary looked pleased, and just then Lady Merrivale called him away.

"Please, somebody come—you Dr. Cary—and help me to carve this dreadful sugar cake. It wants a pickaxe to it. Oh, how clever of you!" as Jim cut a slice; "that comes of being a doctor, I suppose. You know where everybody's joints are, even a plum-cake's."

"I never can carve a duck," interpolated Sammy Head, "because they always have their joints in different places. It is infinitely original of them."

"We ought not to eat things with joints," replied her ladyship, shaking her head; "it makes life so much more difficult."

"And there are not many animals without them," suggested Sammy.

"Why, beef and mutton haven't any, stupid," exclaimed Lady Merrivale. "At least, I mean proper mutton—not that nasty choppy sort."

"I think it is more difficult to eat things without any joints," he drawled. "Asparagus, for instance. I always think eating asparagus is like kissing under the mistletoe—it is the underneathness which only makes the action possible."

"And it is always so hard to get underneath the drooping end," Lady Merrivale agreed.

"There are other dangers besides," Sammy continued. "If ever I have rheumatic fever it will be from eating asparagus, because the water out of the thick end always runs up my sleeve and then when it goes cold it is as bad as sleeping in a damp bed for giving one a chill."

"It is so funny that we eat asparagus with our fingers and not any other vegetable."

"It would be drier and cleaner and certainly easier to pick up a neat little potato or to nibble at a carrot. Society wants reforming, Lady Merrivale. Shall you and I run a reformation?"

"Oh, yes! That would be delightful. You are such a clever boy, Sammy. Isn't he?" appealing to Jim Cary.

"He is clever enough at wicket-keeping," said the doctor, with a smile, "as all England knows."

"I don't care much about cricket," continued Lady Merrivale; "it always seems so long to look

at, and I never know what they are doing ; but I like to see the ball hit nice and high."

Sammy uttered a shriek of mirth.

"What are you laughing at? Me, I suppose. But anyway, I don't call it playing at ball unless the ball goes high up into the air."

"And somebody catches it, I suppose," added the cricketer.

"Exactly. And it seems to me that two are enough to play at that game without the other twenty."

"After you have reformed society you might undertake cricket," suggested Sammy.

"I wish you were my brother," said Petronel, suddenly looking at Sammy's tie, "because your colours would suit me so well ; and it is so tiresome not having any to wear."

"Be a sister to me," he drawled. "Lots of other girls have said they will be, in answer to—a kind inquiry on my part."

"I cannot remember what I had for breakfast this morning," said Lady Merrivale, with a yawn ; "it seems so tremendously long ago."

"I had lobster," observed Sammy. "I have had no difficulty ever since in remembering."

"Nonsense," laughed the doctor, "you young fellows nowadays are too fond of having indigestion and all kinds of complaints that belong by right to your betters."

"I don't think a chap like you ought to be a doctor," Sammy retaliated, "for you look as if you

knew nothing about ailments, from experience I mean."

"Oh! but that is no reason," interrupted Petronel, "for you needn't have had things to know about them. Sylvia Desmond knows everything about falling in love, but she has never been in love herself. She says she is a specialist on the subject."

Sammy lit a cigarette. "There is a good deal in what you say. A specialist for deafness would not necessarily be deaf himself."

"Of course not."

"But does this Miss Desmond really know as much as she boasts of?" queried the cricketer.

"Perhaps she only pretends to know," suggested Jim. "You young ladies are very clever at pretending. I have heard you lately," turning to Petronel, "pretending that you know nothing about games, or sport, or lots of the things that interested you so enormously a year ago."

"I have come out since then," Petronel explained. "I don't wear pinafores now. And, besides, Mummy has taught me lots of new games in London that I find much more amusing than tramping over heather or tiring myself to death with exercise, or playing any of Daddy's games."

"And what are these new ones?" asked Jim, looking keenly at the girl's proud young face.

"Dancing and gambling, and—oh, you know!"

"The kind of cricket Lady Merrivale wants to teach us," interpolated Sammy, "which only two

can play at. Somebody throws a ball, and somebody else catches it."

"And what is the ball made of?" asked Alison suddenly.

"You must question Miss Merrivale about that," said Sammy, "it is her game. A cove can't play every game, and cricket happens to be mine."

"The ball is made of the things it happens that particular man wants to catch," explained Lady Merrivale; "there are many different kinds. Petronel is not quite so clever as I used to be in their manufacture, but she is young as yet."

"She has learnt a good deal in the time," said Dr. Cary.

"A London season is the best finishing school," continued her ladyship. "Why, I knew absolutely nothing before I came out. I could not even spell Barnscombe until I married Bobby."

"But I can do that before I've married any one," persisted Petronel, "so I am cleverer than you are, Mummy, after all."

"You are wrong there, my dear; I married in my first season, and that was cleverer still."

On the drive home Alison sat between Jim Cary and Sammy Head. Claud drove with Lady Merrivale in the phaeton.

"Is Miss Royse an orphan?" he asked her with much interest.

"Yes. But don't you go falling in love with her, Claud. It is not good enough."

"I suppose she is not absolutely penniless?" he

continued tentatively. "It is so sad for a young girl to be thrown on the world's mercy. She interested me deeply, and it would distress me to hear that life was hard on her."

"That is rubbish, my dear Claud. I forget how much her father or uncle or somebody left her, but it was not enough for you, I am sure."

"Was it in the hundreds or the thousands, do you think?"

"I tell you I don't know. But you can go to Somerset House and look up the will for a shilling. Only don't be so silly, Claud, over a pair of brown eyes and a pretty mouth."

"She has an awfully sweet voice."

"Voice, forsooth! I am surprised at you—indeed, I am. Talking like that! A sweet voice won't pay your bills."

"I was not thinking of myself, Lady Merrivale," in rather a hurt voice, though he rarely ever thought of anything else. "I was picturing my sweet flower-maiden—for such she is in looks and ways—saved from the din and toil of the world's work by so commonplace a thing as money, and hoping that enough of it for this is hers."

"You ought to marry money, you know," said her ladyship severely, "and a proper amount, too."

"I know, I know," sadly. "It is a mockery to have to think of such a thing in the midst of the world's beauty. But it must be. I could not paint, as I feel I have it in me to paint, if I were harassed

by such petty worries as the lack of money involves. It is hard that it should be so."

"Marrying an orphan is rather a pull in one way," said Lady Merrivale dryly. "You know the worst as regards her fortune, and you would never be called upon to entertain your mother-in-law."

"You speak hardly and cynically, dear lady. And I see you do not understand me—not as she does," he added plaintively.

"A good deal better, if truth must be told," replied Lady Merrivale sharply, "or than you do yourself. But never mind, light a cigar, and smooth out the wrinkles between your eyebrows, they are not becoming."

"I want to ask you," he began, when the cigar was in full swing, "what right has that old doctor to look as if the girl belonged to him?"

"Only an avuncular one. He is engaged to her aunt."

"Oh! is that all?" and Claud's face brightened.

"But I am not sure that he won't fall in love with the niece before he's done," continued her ladyship thoughtfully. "He looks at her when he is talking to her even now, and that is a bad sign. And he looks at her when he is talking to other people, which is worse."

"But he is much too old for her," crossly.

"My dear Claud, Jim Cary is a very attractive man even when he does not want to be. There is something about the set of his shoulders that is dangerous—positively dangerous. I even like to

be ordered about by him myself, and I am an epicure in such sensations, you know."

"He ought to marry the aunt," muttered the artist.

"Moreover, I noticed the first time I met them out at dinner—a small affair at the Rectory—Jim came into the drawing-room after dinner a full two minutes before the other men. And a man nearly always does that if he is in love with any one who is present."

"Did he go straight and talk to her?"

"Oh, no! But that is nothing. He looked for her, though, the moment he came in."

"Wasn't the aunt there?" asked Claud impatiently.

"No, she was not. And I never knew Jim come in so soon before, though he and Lavinia Garland have often dined up at the Court."

"I am going to teach Miss Royse how to sketch," said Claud grimly.

"Then you are a bigger fool than I gave you credit for. You will propose to her, that is the next thing, and a fine tree you will be up if she accepts you."

"I can take care of myself, thank you, Lady Merrivale."

"You are not the first man who has thought that and come a cropper. Now, Claud, be sensible and go home to-morrow."

"No, no. I have got till the 15th on the invitation."

“Well, don’t say, when it is too late, that I have not warned you,” and Lady Merrivale shook her head at him solemnly.

Alison enjoyed her drive home more than any other part of the day. Sammy was so full of fun, and she always liked to hear the doctor talk. The conversational atmosphere was so much fresher than with Claud or the Merrivales, and Alison was very sensitive to atmospheric influence.

“I am very glad to have met you, my boy,” said Jim, as they neared Barnscombe, “for I have always taken a great interest in you as a cricketer. I remember seeing you play as quite a little chap at a school match, and I knew then you would make something of it.”

“Were you at Lord’s?” Sammy wanted to know.

“No, I could not get away. It is your last year for Oxford, isn’t it? You did rattling well. I suppose your county will want you now?”

“Weren’t your people awfully pleased at your getting into the eleven?” asked Alison.

The governor pretended not to be, but I saw his old eye gleam. One of my aunts, though, was the most killing. She wrote specially warning me against getting overheated or playing on damp grass, but she turns up at Lord’s as regular as clockwork, with a mackintosh and goloshes whatever the weather may be.”

“Was that the Miss Head who was at church on Sunday,” said Alison. “Petronel told me she

was an aunt of yours who was breaking the journey on her way to Cornwall."

"Yes. And I had such a time with her on the way down. She has a great idea of breaking a journey. As a matter of fact it takes as long to come round here as to go straight to Penzance; but that is a trifle. Well, at Paddington she suddenly saw a train starting, which she thought was hers, and imagine my feelings to see her rush up the platform and spring into it while it was in motion! I thought she would have been killed. As it was, the impetus flung her on to her face on the carriage floor. And it was really an empty train being shunted into a siding. A porter had to leap into the guard's van to conduct her back again in safety."

Alison and the doctor laughed.

"She was very heated and sooty when she returned," continued Sammy, "and had nearly broken her neck as well as the journey. I hope she has by now arrived safely, but one can't be sure."

"Tell me," said Jim, "what has become of that young fellow whom you succeeded as wicket-keeper? I forget his name."

"O'Grady. He has quite broken down in health after squeezing through some inordinate examination. Awful clever chap! It is overwork, the doctors say, but they don't seem to cure him."

"I expect there are so few cases of overwork nowadays that they get no practice," suggested Alison.

"And what do you know about it?" Jim Cary

asked her, with a smile—the kind of smile with which we watch little children, and in which amusement and tenderness are equally balanced.

“A good deal,” with a toss of her head. “I am not half as ignorant about everything as you think.”

“Did you ever get a prize at school?” Sammy wanted to know.

“Yes, several during my whole time.”

“Ah! then I am afraid it is as Dr. Cary implies. The coves who get the prizes at boys’ schools never know anything.”

“Look,” cried Alison, after a while, “the sun is playing at being King Midas. Everything he touches is turning to gold.”

“It will rain to-morrow,” drawled Sammy prosaically. “It has got a nasty, watery look.”

Alison caught Jim Cary’s eye and smiled. The golden glory from the west burnished the many-coloured woods, and touched the russet bracken at their feet with the glow of fire. The sheaves of corn shone like bundles of sunbeams, and the rough stubble paths between them were turned into streets of gold. A few tired harvesters were trudging homewards along the lanes, and into the fabric of their well-worn clothes the sun was weaving a richness of colour which no manufacturer could copy.

“Hasn’t it been a lovely day?” said Alison; “I have enjoyed myself so much.”

“The best of it is that it is nearly time for din-

ner!" gasped Lady Merrivale, as all the party alighted. "You are sure you won't stay, my dear?"

"No, thanks; it is getting so late."

"The best of it is that it is not nearly time for supper," began Alison to Jim Cary, who was taking her home, "so we need not hurry in. It is so splendid out of doors."

"This is the best part of the day, too," he answered quietly.

"It was so hot earlier. I like Sammy Head, don't you?"

"Oh, yes! He is a very nice boy—what we used to call 'a good 'un' at school."

"I am not sure if I am going to be fond of Petronel Merrivale," doubtfully.

Jim Cary shook his head.

"She is spoiled, I am afraid. She was a sweet little child, and then her father undertook her education. Her mother has done so since. She is wonderfully different from what she was only two years ago."

"Nicer, do you mean?"

"Much nicer mannered and better looking and more attractive altogether. Poor Petronel! Something may save her yet."

"Falling in love might, I should think," suggested Alison thoughtfully; "the real thing, I mean. Not what girls talk of generally so glibly."

"Perhaps you are right," he answered, though he was not thinking of Petronel.

"And so not quite as ignorant as you thought," said Alison mockingly.

"No. But more impertinent," he replied, with delight. "The prizes you gained at school never happened to include one for good conduct, I suppose?"

"I forget now what they were for," defiantly.

"But do you forget what they were not for?"

"No, I remember. Good-night, Dr. Cary; I am going to jump the brook and take the short cut up to the house."

And Jim Cary stood watching her until the wood at the top of the hill wrapped her in its thick dark folds, and hid her from his admiring eyes.

CHAPTER VI

LEARNING TO SKETCH

THE day after Lady Merrivale's picnic, Alison's sketching lessons began. Claud Curtis arranged what he called a woodland studio among the grand old trees beyond Barnscombe Court, and Alison was delighted with the care he had taken to provide her with everything that was necessary, from a paint-brush to a camp-stool. The preparations were perfect, and the surrounding scenery so beautiful, both as regards foreground and the distant glimpses that could be seen beyond the wood, that Alison felt it would be quite easy to be an artist.

"Teach me," she begged, "to paint light low down that shines between the trunks of the trees. That is my favourite effect in a picture."

Claud smiled. And, as he was not really going to teach her, he said:

"We will begin with effects, then. A new style of the impressionist."

"It is so kind of you to take all this trouble!" she exclaimed gratefully.

"It is not a bit kind; because it is what we conventionally call taking trouble that in reality is giv-

ing ourselves the greatest amount of happiness. What costs us nothing is worth nothing. When I go to Christie's, it is not a bit kind of me to pay the price of some work of art I long to have."

"Oh, but that is different! It is always kind to help people, especially if they are ignorant ones."

Claud smiled enigmatically.

"Then will you help me?" he asked.

"Of course I will, if I can."

"Let me put your face into my little sketches. Those that I hope to do while I watch you learning."

"But why don't you do them without a figure at all?" questioned Alison. "I like pictures best that are only landscape."

"Oh, well, if you object it does not matter," and Claud gave a deep sigh.

Alison felt very much ashamed of her ungraciousness.

"I was not objecting," she said quickly, "I should not think of being so horrid when you are doing all this for me."

"It is very good practice for an artist to really learn a face," Claud explained, "and if I sketch yours several times I shall have mastered a new type. It is only just for practice, don't you know? and my eye for colour likes your brown eyes and hair among all this bracken and brown foreground. A fair girl with blue eyes would have been no help to me just now."

"Not even a lovely girl like Petronel?"

"No; you are best in these surroundings. And besides," feeling his way cautiously, "I have a special leaning toward brownness. There is something almost cold to me in Miss Merrivale's beauty. The exquisite daintiness of a piece of Dresden china compared with a bit of Nature's own work. The latter may be more irregular, but it has infinitely more charm."

"Is that why you put me in a brown frock in the sketch you did the other day?"

"Yes; dress ought by its colour to emphasise the best bit of colouring in the face. For instance, a girl with good, yellowy-brown eyes could wear green and yellow as well as brown, and a girl with pink cheeks should wear pink; if her eyes are gray she can wear mauve and any colour of which pink is a component part as well. You, too, would look well in pink. If you remember, the girl's sunbonnet was pink. The best bit of colour to emphasise in your face is your complexion—and the colour of your eyes, too, is a russet brown, with red in it rather than yellow."

"Petronel looks heavenly in blue. I suppose because of her eyes."

"Exactly; they are by far her most vivid bit of colouring. But the dress colour must only bring out the real colour."

"How do you mean?"

"When I say you would look well in pink it is because the pink of the dress would be stronger than that of your cheeks, and so intensify it. But

if a girl has such a high colour as to be vivid pink of itself, she would want it toned down instead. It is the same with very red hair. That wants no emphasising, for it is as strong as is wanted of itself, and so a detracting colour should be worn with it."

"Why do most people look well in black?" Alison wanted to know.

"Because it nearly always darkens their eyes, which is becoming, and it does not detract from any other colour they may have. Only very pale people with eyes already black do not look well in mourning. It is interesting to know the why of things, isn't it?"

"I am interested in this," said Alison, "but I do not generally like to know the why of everything. It seems somehow to turn pictures into sums, and I always hated arithmetic and loved picture-books."

"So did I. How many tastes we have in common. But now, Miss Royse, watch me doing this bit of foreground, and you will soon learn the trick."

And Alison was quick to copy him, even if she could not copy Nature, which is a much more difficult matter. His dexterous touch followed hers, and between them the water-colour grew, and the girl did not know how little of it was hers. She was delighted with the effect, and full of enthusiasm for doing more to-morrow.

"Your progress is marvellous," Claud assured

her. "Didn't I say you were an artist ready-made?"

"But have I really done that?" she exclaimed, looking at the block in amazement.

"You have indeed," said Claud, and he was not intentionally mendacious; "all the life of the sketch is yours. I only supplied a little of the technique."

"I never dreamed that sketching would be so easy!" and she smiled proudly at her work.

"It would not be so to everybody. Indeed to hardly any one but you, Miss Royse."

And Alison drank in the flattery of the faintly accentuated "you," and thought what a delightful man Claud Curtis was. They walked home most of the way together, and Alison rushed into the Old House in great excitement to show off her first sketch.

"Look, Grannie," she cried, waving the paper in triumph, "this is what I have done. Look, Aunt Vinnie!"

"Oh, Alison!" exclaimed Lavinia admiringly, "how wonderfully clever of you! It is exquisite."

"Not bad for a beginner," said Mrs. Garland approvingly; and this was great praise from her.

Jim Cary was having tea at the Old House—he stood up with the others to examine the work of art, but he did not speak. Alison looked up at him inquiringly.

"Don't you think it is rather good?" she asked coaxingly.

"I think it is very good," he replied gravely. Lavinia regarded him with anxiety.

"Will you not give the child a word of praise?" she begged. "I am sure she deserves it."

"James does not approve of these sketching lessons," Mrs. Garland explained; "he has been speaking to me very strongly on the subject."

Alison tossed her head. "You have no right to interfere with what I do, or to speak strongly on any such subject."

There are few downfalls so sudden, or which hurt more, than when we are unexpectedly pushed off a pinnacle of enthusiastic success into a depth of cold disapproval.

"I thought you admired art," she replied, as he made no answer, "or perhaps it is that you would not deign to call this art?" with fine scorn.

"Yes. This is a work of art," and he picked it up and studied it carefully.

"Then what is the matter with it? What makes you so horrid to me about it?" impatiently.

"I don't think I will tell you—now," he answered gravely.

"Why not?" persisted Alison, with flushed face and flashing eyes. "I want to know what possible reason you could have for spoiling all my pleasure in my little picture, and trying to drown all my enthusiasm?"

Lavinia fled from the room at this juncture, but her mother looked on with delight.

"The child is Margaret over again," murmured the old lady, with satisfaction.

"Well, tell me!" demanded Alison again, with a little stamp of her foot.

"It will hurt you," he said, in a low voice, "and I don't want to do that here."

"As you feel for me so much, perhaps you had rather not hurt me at all?" scornfully.

"I would rather not, of course; but I am going to do so all the same."

"Then do it now. I don't care," and her chin went into the air. "What is the matter with my unfortunate picture?"

"Only the possessive pronoun. It is a very clever picture, and a very pretty one—but it is not yours."

"How dare you say so?" But he saw the girl wince, and was sorry for her.

"You thought it was, I know," he continued kindly; "but that fellow has deceived you. It is his work—not yours really."

"He has not deceived me. What rubbish!" and Alison waxed angrier. "Of course he helped me, but I did it, I tell you. You are horrid to say such things to me. Isn't he, Grannie?"

"Tut, tut, my dear! Do not appeal to me. I am out of this row."

And it was the first she had been out of at the Old House for nearly fifty years.

"And besides, if he did help me," said Alison weakly, after a few seconds, during which her

grandmother had left the room, "he taught me, too. And it is something to have learned even a little of how to produce such an effect as this."

"There is no way of learning how to sketch a whole without passing through all the stages of drudgery that lead up to it; and it is false teaching to have made you think otherwise. I know," and he smiled slightly, "how much it appeals to you—the thought of doing anything without the trouble of learning how to do it. I know, too, that you are wonderfully quick to pick up an idea, or a trick, or an imitation, and it is clever to do so; but that kind of thing is not art."

Alison's eyes softened. She might be a wilful, but she was not in the least an obstinate girl.

"Do you remember telling me that you loved art so much that you knew you could never be an artist?" Jim asked her.

"But Mr. Curtis says I am an artist."

"Then he says what he knows to be untrue," exclaimed the doctor hotly, "and he ought to be ashamed of himself!"

"You are very rude!" and the girl flashed up again; "and I won't listen to abuse of my friends!"

"Is that fellow one of your friends already?"

"Indeed he is. And," with a defiant gesture, "I am going sketching with him again to-morrow."

The doctor set his lips.

"I have no power to control your actions," he said shortly.

"I am thankful to say you have not! I wish

also that you had no power to criticise them; it would tend more to our being friends."

"No, it would not," he replied in a low voice, as he went out through the garden-door to look for Lavinia.

"Poor Alison seems a little upset this evening," said her aunt apologetically, when she and the doctor were strolling up and down the lawn together. "I am so sorry about it, James. I am afraid she spoke to you a little disrespectfully."

"What nonsense!" he replied, rather impatiently; "but I am very uneasy about this artist and these sketching expeditions."

"Still, James, what can we do? Alison must get engaged to some one, I suppose, though it is so difficult for us to realise that she is old enough."

"Good gracious, Lavinia, what are you talking about? Alison engaged to that young puppy! I would wring his neck first!"

"Oh, James, I am afraid I have vexed you; but I did not know Mr. Curtis was not nice, or of course I should not have mentioned such a thing. Besides, I spoke unwittingly. Oh, I am afraid you thought me wanting in delicacy to make such an allusion! I was only repeating what Mother had said; I should never have thought of it myself."

"That does not matter. I want you to feel that you can say anything to me. But I wish he had never come to Barnscombe!"

"He is not a proper artist, then, I suppose?" she ventured to ask timidly.

"He is clever enough—far too clever! That is the worst of it! That sketch is awfully clever—and it was cleverer still to make poor Alison believe she had painted it."

"And did not she really, James?"

"Of course not! That is the work of a practised hand."

"It was wonderful of you to find that out!" exclaimed Lavinia. "I had quite jumped to the conclusion that dear Alison was a genius, and would have pictures in the Royal Academy next year."

The doctor laughed somewhat grimly.

"Then isn't she a genius, James?"

"No. She is something better," he added, in a low tone.

"I am quite disappointed," continued Lavinia sadly.

"I am not," he replied under his breath.

The sketching lessons continued every day. At first Alison was shy of praise, for Jim Cary had slain her faith in her own powers, but Claud was so kind and encouraging, and gave her so many hints by which she could in truth produce certain effects, that the soreness healed, and she began to find much pleasure in their daily intercourse. Every now and then a suggestion of the absurd flashed across her mind, but she dispelled it as ungrateful and unkind, and felt a pride in the fact that though Dr. Cary might think her so young and ignorant, Claud Curtis was willing to sit at her

feet and commune with her as an equal on the things they both loved so well.

"It was distinctly providential my coming to Barnscombe," he said one day, as, after their work was over, they started on a walk to the shore. "Two invitations came by the same post, and it was solely because I opened Lady Merrivale's first that I decided to accept it."

"I am very glad you did," replied Alison sincerely.

The other invitation had been to spend two nights with a friend in a very unlovely London suburb instead of a fortnight in the most beautiful part of beautiful Devonshire. But Claud only remembered the divine interposition which had directed his steps to Barnscombe. By this time he had completely forgotten all the details of the other invitation.

"It is strange, too," he continued, "how among a crowd of new acquaintances only one or two friends shine forth, as fixed stars in a firmament of wandering ones. I knew by some strange instinct that I had not found a friend up at the Court till I saw you."

"I suppose friendship and acquaintanceship are different in kind, not in degree?" said Alison thoughtfully.

"Of course they are," eagerly. "How quickly you understand my meaning! You and I were predestined to be friends, I feel, from the beginning of time."

"That is a long while ago!" said Alison, with a smile. "But at any rate we are friends now."

"We are indeed! And I cannot tell you," he continued earnestly, "how much your friendship means to me. No one has ever understood me before as you do."

"Not even the friend you lost?" asked Alison, slightly surprised.

Claud had forgotten him for the moment; but, with a flash of thought, he compared the ready, delicate sympathy of the girl he was beginning to care for with the rough comradeship of an old school-friend; and his voice rang with sincerity as he answered:

"It is so different—your way of understanding and his! There must be a clumsiness about a man friend which is foreign to the tender insight of a woman's soul. I valued his friendship very highly, but that was before I knew what yours was like."

"I am not sure whether you quite understand me," said Alison slowly.

"I do. I do. Better than you do yourself."

"But I only show you one of my moods," argued the girl, "and you can't really understand a person till you have seen them all."

"There you are mistaken, my dear Miss Royse. The knowledge of experience is vastly inferior to that of intuition, and it is the latter which has revealed you to me."

Alison looked doubtful. Deep down in her heart, where Claud had never been, she knew that

he did not understand her as Jim Cary did. But she also felt that it was a delightful change not to be perfectly understood, and to pretend to herself that she really was all, and only all, that Claud Curtis believed.

"You read my soul as a book," he continued, "and you interpret the secret pages wherein are written all my ideals. I would rather lose my life than my idealism. It means so much to me."

Claud did not know that if he had used the word ambition instead of idealism his statement would have been almost true.

"Would you really?" she exclaimed. "I should not have thought that you would have died for your ideals. But few men have been ready to die for love of God, and fewer still for love of man; and ideals, though beautiful pictures and promises of the future, are hardly stronger than death. You might live for them, I can believe, but to die for them is a different matter."

"There you mistake me," he cried heroically. "It is just what I would do. I feel the power of the greatest self-sacrifice within me—that which can only spend itself in death."

Alison was awed by his tone and impressed by the intensity of his enthusiasm.

"I am not a bit great and good as you are," she said simply.

Claud looked at her with love in his eyes. What would not life be with such a companion always at his side? Then he remembered it would mean giv-

ing up his expensive rooms in St. James's Street, and he sighed over the cruelty of Fate. Why had not the fickle goddess endowed this perfect girl with a fortune large enough to meet his demands? Then they might have been so happy together.

"Of course I try to be good," Alison went on in a low voice, "but it is so difficult sometimes."

"Is it really?" exclaimed Claud, who, having never made any effort in that direction, had never discovered the difficulty. "I should not have thought it would have been to—to people like ourselves."

Alison's eyes had wandered over the wide stretch of sand and sea before them, and she hardly heard his last words. The talk was stirring memories that were wider and more far-reaching even than that distant horizon line—memories of childish resolutions and girlish dreams, and the anguished longing, after she had lost her mother, so to follow that good example that, with her, she might be made a partaker of the heavenly Kingdom. Claud saw the trouble on her face, and his heart beat more quickly. If it had not been for the thought of St. James's Street, he would most certainly have tried to comfort her with the gift of his love. Indeed he felt it very hard that he was prevented from doing so.

"I will paint a picture," he exclaimed, "the greatest I have ever done; and it shall be a shore and sea and sky exactly like to-day's, and there shall be two figures in the foreground—a beggar

girl and a poor fisherman, and he shall just be starting in his boat, obliged to leave her to try to earn enough for a day's bread. And she shall be bidding him God-speed, with a great, tender sympathy in her eyes. And when it hangs in the Academy, and the crowds stand before it, only you and I will know what our picture means."

"If it means that I wish you God-speed it is right. And you will put in that splendid reach of country beyond the bay, and the light and shade on the hills, and the far dusky headland out yonder?" And her eyes sparkled with interest in the idea.

"I will make a study of it to-morrow, and when I have used it for the great picture I will send it back to you as a keepsake."

"How good of you! I do like your sketches so much."

"Look here," and he undid his portfolio, "I have lots of them—choose a couple."

Alison turned them all over. "You have put me in every one," rather reproachfully.

"I could not help it. Forgive me. I can but offer them all to you in reparation," and he looked pleadingly at her.

"Oh, I could not be so greedy as that!" laughed the girl; "but I should like this one for the wood, and that one for the bit of sea."

"And this for the piece of old-fashioned garden, where my lady is gathering flowers."

"I sha'n't know what to do with such riches."

"You can give them to your people," he suggested. "They will be glad enough of your portrait."

"It is awfully good of you!"

"No, it is not, Miss Royse, for I have kept the best for myself now."

When Alison displayed her treasures at home, Jim Cary again happened to be there. They all admired the wonderful cleverness of Claud's touch, and the admirable skill with which he had made Alison into a village girl in the wood, and a fisherman's daughter on the shore, and an old-world lady in a garden, and a milkmaid in a meadow.

"Which would you like, Grannie?" she asked generously.

"The milkmaid one, my dear."

"And you, Aunt Vinnie?"

"I prefer the lady in the garden. There is something so refined in the muslin fichu and the large hat with feathers. And of course such a dress as that is more becoming than the poor girl's clothes."

"My favourite is the wood one," continued Alison. "I am so glad you neither chose it."

A little while afterwards, when Lavinia had gone to feed her fowls and Alison was sitting swinging on the hammock, Jim Cary came striding across the grass towards her.

"Won't you give me the remaining sketch?" he asked directly. "I do want it so."

Before Alison could answer him, some little evil

imp hurried to remind her that the doctor hated Claud Curtis, and had done all he could to prevent and spoil her pleasure in these sketching expeditions; and, moreover, assured her that he deserved punishment rather than reward for his action all through in the matter.

"I am afraid I cannot spare it," she said slowly.

Jim looked at her and read her face as an open book.

"You know that is not the reason," he replied quickly.

Now Alison had been a great deal lately in the company of Claud Curtis, and she had enjoyed the way in which she had been able every now and then to adopt a fancy rôle with him, or else only to show the little effective pieces of her character. The keen understanding of Jim Cary was to her just then an unattractive contrast to the much-talked-about surface understanding of the young artist, and she was impatient of it.

"Perhaps I may be allowed to know my own reasons even better than you do," she answered defiantly. "I am thinking of sending it to—to an old schoolfellow."

The doctor noted the slight hesitation, but he passed it over.

"Don't do that, please, Alison. It would give me so much pleasure—far more than it could give her."

"How can you tell? You don't know how fond she was of me," exclaimed the girl perversely.

"I ask you as a great favour to let me have it," he repeated. "Don't be cross because I vexed you the other day. I did not do so out of unkindness, you know."

Now when people are sore about anything, they very much resent any allusion to the real reason as a possible one; so Alison tossed her head, and said scornfully:

"You are quite mistaken in supposing I am cross. Only I won't be dictated to in everything by you," she added, in childish petulance. "You were quite ready to wet-blanket all my nice times with Mr. Curtis if you could; and now when you have found you could not, you want one of the best sketches as a reward. And I won't give it you; so now you know the truth."

Jim smiled. He was not afraid of Alison's anger, and he still meant to have the picture by some means. He would have given almost any price for it; it pleased him so intensely. The poise of the girl's figure was perfect, as she stood barefooted on the shore, resting for a moment from her work, with the shrimping-net in her hand. And on her face was that pathetic look which Jim Cary loved best of all Alison's expressions, and would give almost everything he possessed to have to look at daily in his home.

During the following week the artist's visit at the Court came to an end.

"Keep me a little longer," he begged Lady Merrivale, "for I am in love, and the rest of the

world is all so dreary and empty where she is not."

Lady Merrivale was too much a man's woman ever to dream of saying, "I told you so."

"There would be so little else to say," she once confided to a friend, "if you allowed yourself that indulgence. That is why Bob is such a devoted husband. I am frivolous and extravagant, and I flirt and gamble and do almost everything he disapproves of; but when his plans, against which I have warned him, turn out badly, as men's plans always do, I am surprised and sympathetic. It pays in the long run."

So when Claud pleaded for an extension of his leave because he was in love with Alison, Lady Merrivale was extremely sorry for him.

"Poor boy! I wish I could. But we are all going away to-morrow. Is she in love with you?"

Now it had never occurred to Claud that any one, especially she whom he had delighted to honour in so exceptional a way, would not be so.

"I have not asked her," he explained. "I could not, because of my cruel circumstances."

"You have a thousand a year, you extravagant boy. If you really do love the girl——"

"Of course I love her. But, Lady Merrivale, think what a little way a thousand a year would go!"

"In your present mode of living, perhaps. But you could take a house in the suburbs on that, and paint just as well."

"The word suburbs makes me shudder. I should die at Maida Vale, for instance. Who could live at such a place?"

As a matter of fact a considerable number of men and women can and do, and of this Lady Merrivale hastened to remind him.

"But I am different," he pleaded. "A stunted, suburban life would blight my soul and soil my Art. And I must be true to my Art, and think of it even before myself."

"I am not sure whether Alison does love you," continued her ladyship. "I watched her very carefully yesterday when she was up here, and I have a specialist's eye for such cases."

"But she will," Claud exclaimed confidently, "if I ask her."

"She likes and admires you, and your cleverness in art appeals to her enormously; but," and Lady Merrivale shook her head, "she is too friendly for this stage of the proceedings."

"She is kicking against the pricks as regards that old doctor now," said Claud. "Haven't you noticed it?"

"Yes, I have. But I am not sure if that is a good sign for you either. She is ready to fight Jim Cary any minute and to defy him all along the line, but that kind of thing is not so far removed from love as a cheerful, easy friendliness."

"If only she had twelve hundred a year instead of two, how happy we might be!" sighed Claud.

"You might be happy on much less," remarked

Lady Merrivale severely. "At least many people are. Not that I am recommending the course, for it takes about twelve thousand a year to keep me happy. Still, Alison is not an expensive girl, and you might paint a few portraits every year to keep the pot boiling."

"Paint for money! Never," cried Claud, utterly unconscious for the moment that nothing would induce him to put his brush on canvas for anything less than the full market value.

"Then go home to-morrow, and forget all about the girl. She soon will forget you, unless I am much mistaken."

Claud did not like this way of stating the circumstances. He wanted to go home, to his comfortable St. James's Street rooms, with a sad heart, and a soul satisfied with the sacrifice he was making for Art and Alison and Right, all rolled in one. And, moreover, to feel that she would remember and care for him till death, and that Fate would have to pay him a very large account some day as a recompense for her cruel treatment of him now.

When he had gone, Alison's enthusiasm for sketching faded. Secretly she made a few attempts all by herself, and the results were not inspiring. Then the memory of Claud began also to fade, and the superficial interest, which was really all she had felt for him, was replaced by a sudden friendship with a young philanthropist lady who had taken a funny little house down by the sea, and filled it with a dozen or more street arabs from the

slums of London. Alison's wonderful understanding of children taught her both how to play with and to rule them. And Jim Cary drew a deep breath of satisfaction as he heard her merry laugh, and saw her paddling down on the shore with a tribe of appreciative urchins.

"I am so sorry," she exclaimed one evening, when he overtook her walking homewards after a hard day's play, "for Sister Ursula cannot afford to have any more children down from London. She collected nearly enough for these beforehand, and I have helped her out with them; but I do wish before this lovely autumn weather is over that she could have had one more lot."

"How much would that cost?" asked the doctor.

"Ten pounds," said Alison sadly.

"I will give you ten pounds for that sketch," he continued.

Alison's face was a study, and Jim smiled to himself.

"Won't you help Sister Ursula independently of me?" she asked breathlessly.

"No. I have given away in charity all that I can afford this year. But I have still a little fund for works of art and books, and it is out of that only I can afford ten pounds."

"But I vowed you should not have it," hotly.

"Then the children will lose their holiday."

"How can you take such horrid, mean advantage of me?" she cried impetuously.

He did not speak, and she went on:

“Of course I would not give in about this if it only affected myself, but that is just where you are so horrid—you give me no choice in the matter when I know how much it means to those wretched children! How can you catch me in such a trap? I never thought you could be such a—such a brute!” And she stamped her foot.

“If you will send me the picture to-night, I will bring you the money by breakfast-time,” he said quietly.

“I won’t walk or talk with you any more,” she replied wrathfully. “You are too mean! I should never have believed it of you,” and she turned her back on him and walked up the garden path with her head very high in the air.

“How well she looks in a rage,” murmured Jim to himself, as he watched her with a smile.

That evening a parcel was brought in to him, and inside it with the sketch was a slip of paper, on which was written, “Grudgingly and of necessity.”

“I have never seen her handwriting before,” he thought, as he folded it up and put it in his pocket-book. Then he sat long, looking at the picture. “Poor little thing! What a shame it was of me; but it was the only way to get this.” And he smiled to himself several times.

The new batch of children enjoyed themselves even more than their predecessors, and Alison spent all her time with them and Sister Ursula. Lavinia went with her once to help, but it was not quite in

her line. It was the last day, and Dr. Cary had promised a feast of good things to the youngsters.

"Shall we spread a nice table on the lawn?" suggested Lavinia.

"No, let them sit about anyhow and have it absolutely free and easy," was Alison's opinion; and Sister Ursula agreed with her.

So the children lay on the grass and ate plum-cake and drank milk and pulled crackers and nibbled apples till they literally could do so no more. Lavinia's gentle "Don't" to this or that made not the slightest impression on these old little children of the slums.

"Her's a green 'un," observed one youth of tender years, pointing Lavinia out with his thumb.

"The big 'un's my lydy," announced another, his haggard cheeks bulging with good things.

"No more yourn nor mine," argued a friend with physical emphasis.

"Is the gentleman a old 'un or a young 'un?" a small boy wanted to know.

"Old 'un," replied a friend.

"Seen him chuck a stone in the sea? Old 'un's don't throw like 'im."

"Middlin' I should sye," decided a friend.

"Arsk Bill. 'E'll twig a cove's sort better'n most."

"'E's a old 'un," announced Bill shrewdly, "but 'e's fust prize at that."

Then Dr. Cary produced a box of sweets for every one tied up with coloured ribbons.

"You haven't opened yours, I see," Alison observed to Bill in passing.

"I shall tyke it 'ome to the byby," he explained; and it struck her that not one of these poor little chaps opened the tempting boxes, which with one accord they decided to take home for less fortunate friends and relations. She wondered whether a group of small Eton boys would have been as unselfish.

"It has been a splendid time, and they have been so happy!" she exclaimed to Jim, as they stood by themselves for a moment on the sands.

"You have given it them," he said gently.

"No, you did really, with the ten pounds."

"You are wrong there. You paid for it with a heavier price than that—at the cost of your own will and way. A difficult thing to do, I know, but it makes the gift a great one."

Alison looked up at him with very sweet eyes.

"I am sorry I was so cross and horrid, and made a fuss," she said earnestly; "it seems so cheap and paltry now. Will you forgive me?"

"You know that I do," very tenderly.

"And," here Alison's voice sank into a whisper, "I am very pleased for you to have the picture—perhaps I wish I had given it to you at first."

"You dear!" he exclaimed, but in so low a tone that the girl hardly heard him.

Then Lavinia came up and they all went home together.

CHAPTER VII

THE POSTMAN'S STORY

LAVINIA had just come in from a long afternoon's district-visiting, and was very tired. The atmosphere of the hot little kitchens was exhausting even in that bright, autumn weather, and she had to listen to many long tales of suffering and symptoms before she was allowed to escape. That her words of comfort were conventional and unreal she could not help, and besides it did not really matter to the good folk, who wanted somebody to talk to much more than somebody to talk to them. And Lavinia was a good listener. She had listened to other people all her life. Perhaps if she had been a little more egotistical and had had a stronger individuality she would have been a happier and more interesting woman, but it is doubtful if she would have made a better district-visitor.

"Come and have tea, and I will make you some toast," cried her niece, "and forget about the tiresome village people. You look so fagged, dear!"

"I cannot forget them," said Lavinia sadly; "I have just come from the Worsleys'. It seems a great mystery that poor Annie should have been taken."

Lavinia always spoke of those who have been called to a brighter world and more glorious inheritance as "poor"—a curious custom among many Christians.

"I knew how it would be," observed Mrs. Garland grimly. "If Mrs. Worsley had taken my advice and given Annie cod-liver oil, this would never have happened."

"Oh! Grannie," chimed in Alison, "cod-liver oil would never have saved her from fever."

"Really, my dear," said her grandmother, in a severe voice, "you should not get into the habit of giving your opinion on subjects of which you know nothing."

Alison laughed. No reproof cast a cloud across her sunny temper.

"But is cod-liver oil really good for fever, Grannie?" she asked, with a twinkle in her eye.

"Annie needed cod-liver oil," continued the old lady, ignoring Alison's last remark, "and I warned Mrs. Worsley how it would be if she did not give it her. It is a great pity to lose a girl like that. She was so good with her needle."

"It seems a great mystery that it should have been Annie who has died, and not her sister," said Lavinia wearily. "Her grandmother will miss her terribly. While if only it had been Lizzie it would have been a happy release for all."

"It would indeed!" added her mother emphatically.

"Oh, no!" interrupted Alison. "Think of poor

Benjamin Wedge. He is awfully fond of Lizzie. I have so often seen them this summer out together in an evening."

"Evening indeed, such nonsense!" snapped Mrs. Garland. "I don't approve of girls in Lizzie Worsley's position spending their evenings anywhere except in the kitchen."

"But, Grannie, kitchens are so stuffy, and Benjamin is Lizzie's young man, only he isn't very young."

"Young man!" ejaculated the old lady; "upon my word, what are the working classes coming to, with their clubs, and recreation rooms, and young men? In my time they were content with mending stockings, not philandering over the country with lovers and such rubbish."

"I have watched those two girls grow up," observed Lavinia in the pause, "and it has gone to my heart sometimes to see old Mrs. Worsley when Lizzie was worse than usual."

"What is the matter really with Lizzie?" asked Alison, eating large slices of bread and honey.

"It began quite as a child," explained her aunt. "She would be so strange and melancholy for days together, and then she would fly into one of those dreadful passions, and they were quite afraid of what she would do."

"And she gets no better, either," added Mrs. Garland. "That makes it so bad for Mrs. Worsley. She has such a horror of anything like madness."

"It is dreadfully sad for her," and Lavinia's eyes filled with sympathetic tears.

"And yet Benjamin Wedge is in love with her," said Alison musingly. "I do like to think of that."

"What are you talking about, child?" asked her grandmother. "It is most idiotic of Wedge."

"Why, I mean it is so splendid to see that love is nothing that can really be bought or earned," explained the girl, "and that the ideal is open to all. Poor Lizzie is so heavily handicapped in all life's work, and yet the gift of love has been given to her."

Lavinia looked surprised.

"I think love is earned," she remarked. "We must be good and gentle and amiable to be loved."

Alison tossed her head.

"That is not love," she said impetuously. "I am talking about the real thing, and not the liking we can buy with niceness or sweetness, or anything of our own."

"I cannot imagine what Wedge sees in her?" queried Lavinia.

She never entered into arguments with Alison. She so soon was out of her depth in such talk.

"That is just it," exclaimed the girl triumphantly. "Nobody else ever can imagine just what two people see in each other to love. That proves it is a gift to them both, and nothing they have done themselves. If it were, other people would see it too."

"You are talking nonsense, my dear," inter-

polated her grandmother. And then, as if to decide the whole question, "Lizzie Worsley has a queer, pretty little face and a pair of sad, dark eyes. That is quite enough explanation when a man is in the case."

"I do admire her eyes," added Alison; "they are like a hunted stag's, with just the wild look that makes them more beautiful."

"I wish she could be taken into some institution," suggested Lavinia.

"Oh! Aunt Vinnie, how can you? She would be so wretched, and she is really quite happy now."

"She is not bad enough for that," replied the old lady. "It is more like an utterly uncontrolled temper; but she will do something violent one of these days, you mark my words."

"She generally looks very sad but quite quiet," said Alison.

"Oh, that is her usual way! As melancholy as can be till some little thing puts her out, and then she is mad with fury. In my opinion the girl is possessed with a devil," and the old lady's cap strings fairly flapped with emphasis.

"I do not like her at all," observed Lavinia.

"But Benjamin does," chimed in her niece, "and that is what really matters."

"And there she is, a burden to her grandmother," continued Mrs. Garland, "for there never was a more helpless girl with her fingers; and industrious Annie gone! It is, indeed, a great mystery!"

And the old lady shook her head with a severity

that indicated, if she had been consulted, matters would have been arranged much more satisfactorily.

"It interests me immensely," exclaimed Alison; "it is such a strange romance, and so pathetic, too."

"If Benjamin Wedge thought more about his work and less about that girl he would be a wiser man," Mrs. Garland observed finally.

"But not such a happy one, Grannie."

"You are young as yet, Alison," said her grandmother decidedly, an elderly form of argument which is as unanswerable as it is unfair. "When you are older you will know better."

Now here Mrs. Garland was mistaken. It was to be hoped that her grandchild might always know as well. For when the deeper thing has once been revealed to us, and that is no question of learning or of age, we can never know any better, and for the very good reason that we have seen a glimpse of the best.

Benjamin Wedge was the Barnscombe postman, a man made of more sensitive fibre than is common among the strong, stolid, west-country folk. A man who, in his youth, had seen visions, and was now in middle life beginning to dream dreams; of delicate health, not improved by his long daily walk in all weathers, and with a sense of duty that neither storms nor sickness could daunt. The postman never failed to come his rounds, and there was something in his work that appealed to the man's artistic temperament. There were not many letters to deliver, but Benjamin felt that in each he had a share.

He knew the handwriting of the boys away from home at work in the world, and was glad to bring anxious mothers the tidings for which they were looking out. He recognised the different post-marks which indicated that news had come from little maidservants in Exeter, Portsmouth, or even far-away London, and he always wanted to know how they were getting on. With a black-edged envelope the postman gave his ready sympathy, and a tender longing to be able to help; and every letter, whether its tidings were good or bad, the Barnscombe people felt had been brought them by a friend. During his long country tramps Benjamin would enter into all the stories which are woven into the corners of the great web of life's romance; and the hallowing influence of Nature, when he was alone with her in so many moods, entered into the man's soul, and taught him many a lesson he was too illiterate to repeat. And Benjamin loved Lizzie Worsley. The usual red-cheeked village maidens had never appealed to him in the very least, but the small, wan face and beautiful, pleading eyes of this girl, the strange loneliness that shut her out from ordinary happy life, and the sad ring of her soft, sweet voice, all drew him to her with invisible cords. He loved as few men in his class ever do love, and so was misjudged and misunderstood by the ready-tongued, average people, who always commend the practical and condemn the romantic, whether it is to be found in a hidden country village or within the very red cord of society life.

"They all wish it was me as had died in place of Annie," Lizzie told him that night as they sat together on the trunk of a fallen tree in one of the lanes that wound down from the village to the shore. "If it wasn't for you I'd wish it myself."

"Don't say that," cried Benjamin, with a quick pain in his voice; "I'd sooner every one in all the world died afore you, dear."

The girl smiled.

"Would you really?" she asked half-anxiously.

A warm glow swept over her companion's face. He was a tall, gaunt man, who ought to have been a very vigorous one, only disease had laid her withering hand upon his powers and claimed his strength.

"Would I really?" he repeated. "Eh, but you know I would!"

"I like to hear you say so. Nobody else does ever want me, you know."

He took her thin little hand in his, and crumpled it up with tender roughness.

"I want you, my lass," he said gently. "And when we're together like this I don't want nothing more."

"I am very happy," she whispered.

He looked down at the white, upturned face with its strange, deep eyes, and he thought how dear she was. The faded cotton frock and patched boots were in his eyes as the garments of a queen, and the restless expression that was born of a sometimes

beclouded brain, only drew him closer to help and to hold her in her need.

"Ain't it a lovely evening?" he exclaimed, as the fleecy clouds all flushed red with the sun's good-night kiss.

"And I'm always so glad as your work is over early enough for us to have our evenings out," she said, smiling up at him; "but now the winter's coming, I'm feared we sha'n't have so many on 'em."

"We are rare and lucky folks, dear!" he said simply.

They did not look particularly lucky folks to the passer-by. And those who knew them better thought them less lucky still, seeing that all life brought them in the way of happiness was a walk after tea; and, for the rest, toil and poverty, and, worse still, an ever-threatening malady that no doctor could cure. But neighbours and friends do not always see everything, though they talk of much. And Benjamin Wedge was right when he spoke of himself and Lizzie Worsley as lucky folks; for they carried between them a talisman that touched their humble lot with, as it were, the touch of an angel, and lifted their stunted life into an atmosphere that breathed of Heaven.

"I were very bad this morning," continued Lizzie. "Old Mrs. Garland called, and she looked at me horridly, and I hated her."

The man drew her nearer to him.

"Poor little lass! But don't you hate her, dear."

There ain't room in our lives for hating folks; 'tis all taken up with loving each other."

His tender, sympathetic voice soothed the passing trouble.

"I forget what hating feels like when you speak to me," she said softly; "but when you're away I get wild with hating folks, and it's all dark somehow, Ben."

"I know, I know. But I'll take care of you."

"And you won't be angry with me if I forget, and do things as I hadn't ought, will you?" she pleaded.

"Never angry with you, my lass. I couldn't be."

"Not even if I killed any one? I'm afeared sometimes as I might." And her voice was very tremulous.

"Never angry with you," he repeated solemnly, "only desperate sorry for you, dear."

"I like you to be that," she said wistfully. "I want it somehow as I can't understand."

"It don't matter about understanding. I've got you safe."

The girl broke into a glad little laugh.

"Then I don't want to understand," she said brightly. "I just want you, Ben."

"I am here right enough, little lass, and I'll see to you," and his arm clasped her closer than before.

Then they strolled away down the lane that led through fairyland for them, and round by the sand-hills to the village again.

It was not long after this that Dr. Cary took to

the Old House the news of the postman's serious illness.

"Poor fellow! I am afraid he won't pull through! He went out with Lizzie when it cleared up in the evening, and never changed his soaking wet clothes." And the doctor's face looked grave and worried.

"Oh, I am so sorry!" exclaimed Alison. "Poor Lizzie!"

"Troubles never come singly!" sighed Lavinia.

"I always knew Benjamin would get no good philandering after that half-witted girl," said Mrs. Garland snappishly. "It does seem a misfortune such such a good postman should be such a fool!"

Jim Cary looked at Alison. He was getting into a habit of looking at the girl when he knew she would understand things that the others did not, and that was pretty often. He liked, too, to see the light of laughter quenched for a moment in her eyes, and her mouth take those pathetic curves that made her look so sweet.

"How dreadful it would be for Lizzie if he died!" she said simply.

"I am afraid he will," replied the doctor.

"Do you think I ought to go and see him, James?" asked Lavinia, with a troubled look.

"There is no 'ought' about it," answered Dr. Cary, "but he might be glad to see you. Women are soothing in a sick-room, especially such a woman as you are, Lavinia."

She smiled gratefully. "It is very good of you to say so, James!"

"Aunt Vinnie," said Alison, walking with her to the garden gate, "tell him we will be good to Lizzie."

"My dear," and her aunt's voice sounded slightly shocked, "Benjamin Wedge is very ill, in all probability dying, and when people are dying they should be thinking of a better world."

"I did not know there was a better world than that of love," said her niece quietly.

"I am afraid you are very ignorant, Alison. But it is natural you should be on such sad matters as these. Still, my dear, as you grow older you should try to learn the truth, and not to say what sounds even a little irreverent."

The girl was silenced, but not convinced.

"Aunt Vinnie's love must be a funny little thing," she thought to herself, as she stood leaning over the gate. "I thought somebody in the Bible said that love is stronger than death—but hers is hardly as strong as punctuality, for she always hurries in from her walks with Dr. Cary to be in time for tea or supper. I should have thought when she was with him she would have forgotten that there were such things as tea and supper."

And then the current of the girl's thoughts was changed by a wave of sadness that swept over her at the sight of a new postman coming along the road. Who does not know the bitter sadness of seeing

the dear, familiar place filled by a new-comer, and the old work taken up by strange hands?

Lavinia was shocked at the change in Benjamin's appearance. He was well cared for in the cottage hospital, and was supplied by Dr. Cary with everything that skill and kindness could suggest, but all availed nothing to stay the life that was slipping away.

"I am indeed grieved to see you in such a condition, Wedge," began Lavinia, her sympathetic eyes full of tears.

"I am very comfortable, thank you, miss," said Benjamin a little shyly.

Miss Lavinia looked pained. She was afraid it was wrong to feel comfortable when death was in sight.

"Are you happy in your mind?" she asked anxiously.

The man made a restless movement.

"I can't say as I am, miss," he answered slowly, "though thank you kindly for inquiring."

"Oh, Benjamin! let me help you," cried Lavinia, in sudden distress, for she believed that in his few remaining hours the man had to settle his claim on Eternity. "Is it that you cannot believe?"

"Believe, miss, did you say? Oh, no, it is not that! I have always been an easy one for believing what them as understands have told me. But," and his voice suddenly failed, "it's my little lass."

Lavinia breathed a sigh of relief.

"Is that all?" she exclaimed, almost joyfully;

"never mind about that now. Turn your thoughts to better things, Benjamin, for the time is short."

The sick man looked puzzled.

"I can't never turn my thoughts away from her, miss," he said simply.

"But, Benjamin, it is wrong at such a time," she pleaded.

"I can't help it, miss. And I ain't afraid as God won't understand. Only it breaks my heart to leave her," and the big tears rolled down his furrowed cheeks.

Lavinia looked helpless, and just then Dr. Cary came in. She went to meet him with a troubled face.

"Oh, James!" she whispered, "it is so sad. He keeps thinking still of that Lizzie."

The doctor spoke aloud. He knew better than to whisper in a sick-room.

"I have come to have a word with him now, and we must not have two here. Well, Benjamin," sitting down beside the bed, "can I do anything for you?"

"No, thank you, sir."

"I think I can," and Jim's voice was very tender. "I want to tell you that I will look after Lizzie, and see that she is always cared for."

The man's face lit up, and his thin hand grasped the doctor's.

"I can never thank you enough, sir. It's that I mind in going. I ain't afraid of death—somehow I feel as God'll see me through. He ain't the One

to fail us when we're done—but oh! sir, my little lass. What'll she do without me?"

"God will see to her, too, I expect," said the doctor quietly.

"It isn't as if she was a strong one, and could look out for herself, sir."

"I know, I know."

"Nor as if she would ever get another chap. Why, sir," and his voice quivered, "the folks are afraid of her. I'm the only one as loves her, and she does want me so."

"Shall I fetch her to see you?" asked the Doctor.

"No, sir, thank you. She'd hardly understand me being abed and weakly like. And I couldn't bid her good-bye. I reckon God'll bring her to see me next time, and it won't be to say good-bye then."

"Good-night, Benjamin; you are tired now and I want you to rest. I will give your love to Lizzie."

"Aye, sir, do."

And Benjamin Wedge was so tired that he fell asleep, and when he woke he was beyond the region of anxious care, and there is no beyond to the realm of love.

"Does Lizzie understand about it, Dr. Cary?" asked Alison, whom the doctor had overtaken on her way down to the sea.

He was going to the lighthouse, a good walk at low tide on the smooth, hard sands.

"I don't think so. She seemed quite dazed

when I went in. Her grandmother had evidently been talking to her."

"And what did you say?"

"I only told her that Benjamin wanted me to give her his love. And she looked quite happy and said, 'There, I knew he was not dead!' and appealed to me."

"And of course you told her that he was not?"

"How could I?" And Dr. Cary looked surprised. "I hardly knew what to say."

"Oh, how could you be so stupid?" cried Alison reproachfully.

"What would you have said?" he asked.

"Why, I would have told her that he was strong and well and happy, only gone away for a little while, and that she would go to him one of these days."

Dr. Cary looked at the girl's eager, earnest face.

"You talk as if you knew all about it," he said slowly.

"I do," answered Alison simply.

"Tell me what you know?" And the doctor's voice was very grave.

"I have never talked like this to any one since Mother went away, but I don't mind telling you—I think you will understand."

"I will try," he said earnestly.

"Mother used to tell me all about things like that, because Father was There, you know, and that made it her real Home, she said."

"And she believed that she would find him there in the old familiar way?"

"She knew she should," replied the girl. "And she told me all about the strongness of love, and how nothing can break it, not even death, and how all the really beautiful things are the lasting ones."

"Tell me more," begged Jim, as Alison paused with a dreamy look in her eyes.

"And—I forget exactly how she used to say it, because it is so long ago—but that there is no real separation between people who love each other in the highest way. So, don't you see, I know that Benjamin will still be able to care for Lizzie, and I want her to know it, too."

"You must tell her."

"Grannie and Aunt Vinnie would be awfully shocked if they heard me talk like this. They do not understand."

"I am afraid not," and the doctor looked rather sad.

"But Mother said it made all the difference in understanding about things when you want them, so I think perhaps that if Grannie was homesick for Heaven as Mother used to be, she would know more about it. I wouldn't be paid to go to the heaven she and Aunt Vinnie believe in. And I don't think they would either, if it were a matter of choice."

"Oh, but then that is natural enough!" interpolated her companion. "Nobody would as a matter of choice."

"You wouldn't say that if you had seen Mother's face when she knew she was going," replied Alison softly.

"I am so sorry for you, little one," Dr. Cary said suddenly, with a great tenderness in his voice. "I had hardly realised your loss before."

Alison's eyes filled with tears.

"It hurts awfully still sometimes," she said tremulously, "but the torn pain does not go on all the time now as it used. It was before I went to school, long ago. And I know I am not really motherless. But," with a sudden change of tone, "let's talk about Pixie," glancing towards the doctor's little dog.

And Jim Cary understood, and talked of many surface things, till Alison's eyes were dry and even merry again. But after she had turned back, and he was alone on the shore, his thoughts reverted to what she had told him. A truly different faith to any that he had heard of before, for the old evangelical school was the one in which he had been brought up,—but a beautiful and helpful faith all the same—and one that came with special force to Jim Cary just then, as he pondered over the apparent hardship of Benjamin's love being lost to poor Lizzie.

"Only she seemed so sure it was not lost," he said to himself. "Perhaps she knows better than I do after all."

"Oh, dear!" sighed Lavinia a few weeks after the postman's death, "I have been trying to have

a little talk with Lizzie Worsley, but it is quite hopeless."

"What is?" asked her mother, pouring out a cup of tea.

"To get Lizzie to understand. She is much worse— isn't it sad?"

"I don't think her getting worse is a bit sad," said Alison. "Dr. Cary was telling me that the melancholy state and dreadful fits of passion have quite gone away—I suppose it was the shock of Benjamin's death—and that now she is always quite gentle and happy in a childish kind of way."

"And much good that is to Mrs. Worsley," exclaimed the old lady.

"It is much better for Lizzie any way," persisted her granddaughter, "for she has never really understood her sorrow."

"The duty of young people is to their elders, my dear. You seem to forget that."

"I don't, Grannie, but I am so sorry for Lizzie!"

"I told her," continued Lavinia, "that we must be resigned to all our troubles, and then—oh, it was too dreadful!"

"What happened?" Alison wanted to know.

"Why, she actually laughed and said she had no troubles. The girl must be quite mad."

"Then she ought to be shut up," ejaculated Mrs. Garland.

"I was quite afraid of her," said Lavinia. "Mrs.

Worsley was out and it made me so nervous being alone with her in the house."

"But, Aunt Vinnie," began Alison, and then she stopped. It was no use trying to explain.

"What do you want, my dear?" asked her aunt.

"Some more cake, please." And Alison finished her tea in silence. Directly afterwards she went down to the village, and called at the Worsleys' cottage.

"Lizzie ain't in," the old woman explained. "Her's gone out on one of her daft errands a-looking out for Benjamin."

"I will find her," said Alison hurriedly, and then she started towards the gate where she knew the strange, oddly-matched lovers were in the habit of meeting.

A chill wind was blowing up from the sea, bringing down the dying leaves, and moaning softly through the woods as it told them that summer was over. There might almost come a touch of frost with the dawn, for down in the valley a white mist lay along the river's bed, and everywhere the grass was damp and heavy with a dew that the autumn sun failed each day to dry up. Alison found the girl singing a little song to herself as she stood watching at the gate.

"He's late to-night, miss," she stopped to say as Alison came up.

"Yes, dear," and Alison took her hand. She could not say anything more just then, owing to the big lump in her throat.

"Maybe something's hindered him," explained Lizzie, after a few minutes, "or he's wanted somewhere else?" And she peered anxiously into the gathering twilight.

"That's it!" said Alison quickly; "he is wanted somewhere else just now."

"But he'll come to-morrow, miss. He promised me as he would last time."

"Benjamin will keep his promise," Alison assured her.

"Ay, that he will, miss." And the girl laughed a happy little laugh.

"Do you know, miss," she confided in Alison a few minutes later, "I forget what hating is like. Somehow there is nobody in the whole world now, so as there's nobody left to hate."

"Poor dear!" and Alison's eyes filled with tears.

"Why are you crying?" asked Lizzie, with a puzzled look. "Ben said as it didn't matter about t'other folks, not if they all died, if I kept alive! and it has happened like that, you see, miss. So it is all right."

"And are you quite happy now?"

"Oh, yes, miss! O' course I be. He loves me," and the girl lifted her pathetic, vacant face with a proud gesture. "And when any one loves you, and is one as is always taking care of you, you can't help but be happy," and she smiled a far-away smile.

"He loves her, and is always taking care of

her," repeated Alison softly, and a warm thought fell into her heart.

"He said he would, miss," continued Lizzie confidently; "and so I'm telling you true."

"Yes, dear," answered Alison earnestly. "I know you are."

CHAPTER VIII

CONCERNING A SCHOOL TREAT

THE winter passed uneventfully by, bringing with it so little frost and cold that Alison felt it was hardly worth calling winter at all. There was always plenty for her to do and be interested in, even in that small world on the shore of the far west country. For the amount of interest there is in life depends more on the strength of people's individuality than on their circumstances and surroundings. And Alison was so full of high spirits and health and the vividness of living that she never found a dull moment. Moreover, her passion for the country and the sea brought a special delight into every day's life there, and she grew to love not only every stick and stone of the place, but every varying mood of wind and weather. Her first year at Barnscombe had been a very happy one, and she had learned to think of it as her home, with all that is implied of peace and happiness in the word. To her grandmother she was dutiful on the whole, and the old lady secretly gloried in the flashes of spirit which reminded her so much of her favourite daughter. To Lavinia, Alison was a perfect wonder as well

as a beloved niece ; but the young girl's coming had not made her aunt any younger. Indeed, Lavinia found by the contrast that she had indeed let slip all the brightness and gladness of heart and mind, which is the heritage of those whom the gods love, who are young until they die, whenever that may be. And the more staid and quiet walks of feeling suited Lavinia best. She was more at home as the maiden-aunt than as the only daughter, and the responsibility of continually pleasing her mother and Jim Cary she was glad to give over to Alison's keeping. What she should talk about to the latter had been a burden she had daily borne ; but with Alison's coming that care was done away with, and Lavinia could enjoy herself in silence and in peace. To Jim, Alison was an absorbing interest and untiring amusement. He learned to play upon her moods with the delight with which a musician settles to the keyboard of a beautiful organ, and to train her young impatience as a man delights to break in some wayward horse. And she, true to her sex, was fascinated in finding her master, and therefore spent most of her time in trying to prove to him that he was nothing of the kind.

The school treat at Barnscombe was usually fixed for the second week in May, and was pitched upon the very day that Alison had set apart to spend with the Merrivales, who were just calling at Barnscombe for a day on their way to London for the season. There had been great excitement at the Court, and in the village, at the news of Petronel's

engagement to one Lord Conway, which had taken place at Cannes, where they had spent most of the winter. Alison was very eager to hear all about this from Petronel, and she really could not see why she need give up her one chance of doing so for the sake of the Barnscombe school treat. But Mrs. Garland thought otherwise—no royal fête in her opinion being on a level with the great parochial entertainments of her native village—and she firmly decided that Alison should be present. So there was every prospect of a civil war.

“Alison,” called the old lady, as she heard her granddaughter in the hall, “here is a note for you. The Rector left it himself.”

“How tiresome!” said Alison captiously, as she tore open the envelope.

“I can conjecture its contents,” continued her grandmother, “as your aunt has received a similar invitation; but it seems to me a waste of paper and envelope to send you a separate one. The people of the present day are so extravagant.”

Alison read the note, then threw it into the waste-paper basket.

“It is only to ask me to that stupid school treat. But I can’t go.”

Mrs. Garland looked over the top of her spectacles, which indicated a form of serious displeasure.

“What are you thinking about, Alison? Of course you will go with your aunt! She has already written her acceptance.”

“I tell you I am not going,” replied her grand-

daughter defiantly. "I hate school treats. I gave my half-crown towards the expenses, but I must have that day to spend with Petronel. It is the only one she has at the Court, and I don't see why I need give it up for the sake of joining in a lot of nasty, hot games with children, whose sport I shall only spoil."

"My dear, my dear!" interrupted her grandmother, with much sternness expressed in the epithet. "I will not allow you to speak like that. You will go to the school treat because it is your duty, if for nothing more charitable in purpose."

Now this was a mistake on the part of Mrs. Garland, for the question of duty was not really involved, and Alison felt the injustice of the claim. Of course, she had not really any objection to playing even the roughest games with the village children, but she had made up her mind to go to the Court on that day, and she was not going to be bullied into giving it up when there was no real reason. Had her grandmother been laid up, or Lavinia wanting her for any special purpose, she would have thrown over Petronel without a thought; but she was fighting against the Rector's influence on Mrs. Garland, as well as her grandmother's old-fashioned views that the interests of young people should always be subservient to the whims of their elders, and that they have no right to make any plans of their own unless subject to the claims of every one who is older than themselves, who might possibly want them.

"They are not going to turn me into a Lavinia," said Alison petulantly to herself one day, when Mrs. Garland and the Rector had been expressing themselves to this effect. "I know what my duty is, and I will do it, or else stand up and take the consequences like a man; but I will not ask Grannie's leave every time I want to dip my pen in the ink or take another piece of bread-and-butter as Aunt Vinnie does."

So, in reply to the old lady's mandate, she tossed her head and replied:

"I cannot go, Grannie. I am sorry if it vexes you, but I don't see the slightest reason why I should throw over the Merrivales for this."

"Highty-tighty!" exclaimed Mrs. Garland. "In my young days girls did as their elders wished, and never dreamed of speaking in so impertinent a manner. I insist upon your sitting down at the writing-table this very minute and writing a note saying that you will be very pleased to go."

Alison laughed scornfully, and walked out of the room. The door closed behind her a little more vigorously than usual.

"Oh! Lavinia," began Mrs. Garland, when her daughter came in, "I am seriously displeased with Alison. She has behaved in a most defiant and impertinent manner, and refuses to go with you to the school treat. I cannot imagine what has made her so insubordinate in the matter."

Lavinia sighed.

"She wanted so much to see Petronel and have

a talk about the engagement, and that is the only day she can, you know. I expect that is her reason, for Alison is usually so good-natured."

"It is all a pack of rubbish about wanting to talk over the engagement!" snapped her mother, "and I will not allow such self-willed behaviour in so young a girl. She ought to feel that it is her duty to be at the school treat, and be glad to go."

Lavinia looked frightened. Her mother irate was to her the most alarming thing in the world, and she quite trembled for her niece.

"It is not a bit like Alison to be troublesome," she said timidly.

"It is very like Alison with Satan on her back," continued Mrs. Garland, "and I will not have such goings on, I can tell you."

If Mrs. Garland could prevent that attitude on the part of Satan she was indeed a powerful agent for good in this working-day world.

A bright thought suddenly wiped the look of care from Lavinia's brow.

"Do not trouble yourself, Mother. James will be in directly—I saw him in the village—and he will be able to make it all right with Alison."

"That is a good idea," answered Mrs. Garland, "for really that girl is getting more than I can manage. So different from you, and worse even than her mother—but then you had great advantages. I whipped you both from eighteen-months old, while Alison has, I dare say, never been prop-

erly whipped in her life. And spare the rod—you know the result, Lavinia!”

But that was exactly what Lavinia did not know, except by hearsay.

“I do indeed, Mother. Poor Alison!”

“Ah! here is James. He can be very severe at times. I will consult him about her.”

Mrs. Garland gave the doctor a full account of her granddaughter's misdoings, with much shaking of the head and many dissertations on the depravity of the rising generation.

Jim Cary looked very grave.

“Send her down to me, Mrs. Garland,” he said sternly. “And don't you trouble any more about it. I will see that she writes a proper note of acceptance and goes to the school treat.”

“James is a great comfort,” exclaimed the old lady when Dr. Cary had gone. “I am pleased he took such a sensible view of the matter. I shall send Alison to him directly she comes in. She needs a man to scold her sufficiently severely.” And Mrs. Garland's knitting-pins clicked again with righteous indignation.

“But it will be dreadful for the poor child,” said Lavinia sympathetically. “I cannot imagine a more terrible punishment than to be scolded by James.” He had never scolded her in his life.

“If girls will be disobedient, they deserve a terrible punishment,” continued the old lady.

“I do tremble though for Alison,” repeated Lavinia. “I am quite sorry it is his evening

for coming here to supper—it will make me so nervous.”

“Do not be foolish, Lavinia,” said her mother sternly. She was herself regretting that she would not be present at the humiliation of her granddaughter.

A few minutes afterwards Alison was heard whistling in the garden.

“A most unladylike habit that,” observed Mrs. Garland, “but fortunate perhaps in this respect that it indicates her whereabouts. Lavinia, go and fetch her in.”

“Oh, Alison!” cried her aunt as she opened the door, “your grandmother wants you—and I am so sorry you have not been behaving well to-day, dear.”

“It’s nothing,” answered Alison, with a laugh at her aunt’s grave face, “only Grannie was waxy because I am not going to the school treat.”

“Your grandmother is seriously angry, my dear, and you will have to go, I am afraid. But do not keep her waiting. Run in now.”

“All right,” said her niece cheerfully, “only don’t you bother, dear. I can stand the racket.”

Lavinia smiled at this, one of Jim’s familiar phrases.

“But she little knows what it is, poor child!” she sighed. “How dreadful it will be for her!”

A few minutes later Alison was on her way to Dr. Cary’s. She was half amused and half perplexed by her grandmother’s dismissal, and was impatient to know what Dr. Cary would say to her. Like

most women, she was pleasantly, if half fearfully, excited at the thought of a strong man's being angry with her.

"And of course he won't be really," she said to herself, as she tapped at his study window. "Grannie said you wanted me," began the girl, looking up through her eyelashes at the doctor.

"I do want you," answered Jim.

And Alison saw his expression change, and a look sweep across his face she did not understand.

"And why, please?" she continued tentatively.

Dr. Cary's face grew stern.

"Because I hear you are a very naughty girl, and deserve to be put in the corner."

Alison tossed her head.

"I should like to see the person who could put me there," she said, a challenge in her tone.

"That wish of yours will soon be gratified," continued Jim, with a sudden inspiration, "for I am going to put you there while I talk to you."

"That is nonsense!" exclaimed Alison impatiently, "and it is silly to say things like that."

"That is not a proper way of speaking when you are in disgrace," said the doctor.

"Disgrace, indeed!" and Alison gave a little stamp. "I don't know what you mean."

"Then I will tell you. Go and stand over there with your face to the wall, and listen to me."

"I sha'n't!" cried the girl, with a short laugh.

"Then I must make you," added Jim, advancing a step towards her.

Alison breathed rather quickly, and said in a different tone:

“And, besides, it is rude to turn your back on people who are talking to you.”

“That remark is distinctly impertinent,” observed Dr. Cary, “and that is a thing I never allow.”

“Oh! don’t you?” muttered the girl.

“What did you say?”

“I only suggested that I had been mistaken,” she replied sweetly.

“Well, do you hear me? Go over there on to that mat, which furnishes my only vacant corner. And don’t let me have to tell you again.”

Alison’s face took a mutinous mould, and she stood quite still, looking defiantly out of the window.

The doctor laid his hand on her shoulder. Such a strong, capable hand. It made the girl feel as if she were a little child again, and that just the pressure of his fingers could make her go any way.

“You are horrid, and a brute, and I hate you,” she panted, as he guided her across the room; but she stood on the mat with a restless, chafing movement, as if she were indeed tied there with cords that she could not break.

“What does your grandmother complain of about you?” Jim asked, smiling to himself now she could not see him.

“Didn’t she tell you?” in muffled tones.

“Answer my question, please,” sternly.

“That I am the most insubordinate and imperti-

nent girl she has ever had anything to do with," repeated Alison meekly.

"And that is a nice character to have earned! Aren't you ashamed of it?"

"She hasn't had much experience," said the girl in almost a whisper.

Jim Cary put his hand across his mouth.

"Do you never do what you are told?" he asked again.

"I thought I was doing something now," she answered softly.

"So you are. And don't you feel a little bit ashamed? That is the ultimate purpose of standing in a corner."

"Don't!" said Alison quickly. "I hate it, if that's what you mean."

"Most people hate punishment. But do you feel sufficiently subdued to be obedient for, to say the least, the remainder of the day?"

"It seems as if I should have to be obedient to you," said the girl. "And, please, mayn't I come out now?"

"You may, if you are prepared to sit down and write a note accepting the invitation to the school treat."

"I won't do that!" cried Alison. "You know I won't!"

"Now, don't begin tossing your head again," said Jim sternly—but his eyes were not stern as he looked at the girl's proud, impatient gesture. They were full of admiration and tenderness. Hence the

wisdom of Alison's being made to stand with her face to the wall. "You will have to stay there until you do," he added; and Alison knew that when he spoke like that he always meant what he said.

"Then I'll stay for ever," she answered petulantly. "I don't care!"

Jim Cary sat down, and wished that she might be long in yielding. The room seemed so sunny, and the game, half play and half earnest, which they were playing was so full of an indescribable charm to him. Perhaps to Alison also it was not without fascination. There was a long silence, broken only by the rustle of spring which floated through the open window, and the catch of the girl's quick breath, as she stood trying to strengthen her spirit of defiance. She was not going to give in—nothing would induce her. And this stupid nonsense about a corner would have to come to an end. She would not stay there a minute longer, and be made a fool of, and she would never, never write that letter. How quiet the doctor seemed, and how stern his voice had sounded the last time he spoke. She wondered if he were really getting angry, or whether it was only play after all. Of course it was play—how could it be anything else?—and yet what made her keep in such a ridiculous position and feel really a bit frightened underneath? She would have to go to the school treat after all; there seemed no help for it. And she would not really mind much about not seeing Petronel, only it was so irritating of her grandmother to upset the plan for no proper

reason. Still it seemed no use making a point of it. She wished Dr. Cary would speak. Then she looked round half-timidly, and saw he was watching her, and there was something in his look that made a sudden lump come in her throat and her eyes fill with tears. He held out his hand.

"Come, little one," he said tenderly.

"I'll write the letter if you want me to," and there was a quiver in the girl's voice.

"There, there! It's all right!" he answered quickly. "I will help you."

"Will you tell me how to spell 'invitation'?" she asked, with rather a tearful smile.

"Yes, and don't forget there are two c's in accept," he answered, as he put the pen into her hand.

"And you won't be angry with me any more?" said Alison, looking up as she closed the letter.

"Never any more," he promised. "Don't look so sad, little one. It was only a play after all."

"I think it was somehow a bit more than play," said the girl wistfully; and Jim did not contradict her.

"Anyway it is all over now," he exclaimed cheerfully; but it was a great effort to pull himself together and speak thus. The mental atmosphere was so rare and sweet and exotic that he longed to linger in it.

Alison jumped up, and a twinkle was lighted in her eyes.

"Please, sir, hadn't you better come with me to post this letter?"

"Of course I must. And I shall also feel it my duty to come with you to the school treat, to see that you are neither insubordinate nor impertinent there."

Alison laughed.

"How jolly it will be! I am so glad you will be there! I say," she added, as they walked across the field together, "were you really angry that I wanted to go to the Court that day?"

Jim Cary smiled.

"No, I was not really angry with you for that."

"Were you really angry with me for being defiant?"

"No, I was not really angry about that."

"For impertinence?"

"No."

"Then for what?"

"I was not really angry with you at all, little one."

"I half thought you were, once or twice," said Alison.

"Discipline demanded my displeasure, you see."

"And—and it was rather nice, now it is all over, wasn't it?"

"It was!" answered the doctor so emphatically that Alison laughed.

"You are a brute to talk like that," she said, standing still.

"Impertinence again!" observed the doctor, "and impertinence must always be punished."

"No, no!" cried the girl. "I didn't mean that."

I beg your pardon. You'll forgive me just this once, won't you?"

"Well, only this once. So take care."

They walked along for a little in silence—that dear silence which tells of perfect understanding; and then Alison said meditatively:

"Isn't it funny—that I never liked you so much as I do to-day?"

"It is indeed," answered Jim; but he did not look as if he thought it exactly funny.

"And I never had such a nice feeling myself before somehow," continued the girl. "I feel so gentle and good and taken care of. Do you know what I mean?"

"Yes, I think so. And more than you mean, too," he added, half to himself.

"And as if I were very little—so little that I keep pulling your sleeve and running along to keep up with you."

"You really are a little bit of a thing, you know."

"Oh, I am not!" she stated emphatically. "I am as tall as you are."

Jim Cary threw back his head and laughed.

"Well, at least nearly as tall," she argued; "only about three or four inches shorter, and that is quite as tall for a woman."

"Quite," observed the doctor gravely; "rather taller in fact."

"But tell me," she continued, "do you feel anything on your sleeve?"

"I think I do." And Jim Cary's voice was very tender.

"Let's talk about it," said Alison, who was enjoying herself very much. "Did I look at all frightened?"

"Yes, a little."

"But of course I was not really."

"Of course not. Appearances are very deceptive; so is a quick, catching breath."

"Perhaps I was, just a trifle; but only a trifle," and Alison looked doubtful.

"Foolish little thing!"

"You made me, so you shouldn't blame me for it."

"I am not blaming you, you know. Here we are at the post. Let me drop it in."

"Thank you, sir," said the girl, smiling; "so I haven't posted it after all."

"I did not tell you to post it—so that's all right."

"And you've quite forgiven me?" Alison asked once more as they turned up the village street. "You are sure?"

"Perfectly sure. And you will be good now?"

"With you," she answered simply.

As they came in sight of the Garlands' house Alison literally pulled the doctor's sleeve.

"Please don't tell them about the corner," she pleaded softly.

"Of course not," Jim answered quickly. He would have hated Lavinia and her mother to have

known about that little scene, which to him was so full of such deep and tender feeling. They could never, either of them, have understood it. And he felt a sudden sinking of the heart at the realisation of how incapable Lavinia was of understanding all the strong and subtle forces which were making themselves felt so vividly in his life. He tried for a moment to imagine playing that afternoon's game with Lavinia, and the impossibility of the idea hurt as well as amused him.

"But it does not mean that Lavinia is really slow to understand," he argued to himself. "Nobody in the wide world would understand the exquisite charm of such a farce—except Alison," he added mentally.

Mrs. Garland was extremely pleased at the version she received of the incident.

"I have made this unruly granddaughter of yours obey your behest," Jim told her. "And she has written the letter you wished."

"I am thankful to hear it," said the old lady fervently. "You have a great gift in correction, James. I noticed it first when you castigated the gardener's boy for maltreating a cat."

"If ever you have any more trouble with Alison, send her to me," continued Dr. Cary.

"If ever!" repeated Mrs. Garland. "That is like a man, thinking a sin is uprooted all at once, and a girl, especially such a one as ours, reformed by one chastisement."

"I shall be glad to help you as often as she

should need it," said Jim, and truth rang in his tones.

When Alison came in, Lavinia regarded her with sympathetic curiosity.

"But I will not say a word to her," thought the kind soul; "it would be so painful to remind her of that which she has suffered."

This was true kindness on Lavinia's part, as she was longing to know all that had passed, only in a subdued and reverent way as became so sad an occasion.

The girl sat down on a small stool on one side of the fireplace, and began to knit in silence. Mrs. Garland looked knowingly at Lavinia to indicate the reform of Alison, but deemed it more suitable to take no notice of the culprit. Jim Cary also thought it more suitable to take no notice of the culprit, but from a different reason. Occasionally she looked up at him, and once, when he made a small joke, she caught his eye and smiled.

"It was very nice of Alison to bear no malice," Lavinia thought.

After rather a quiet half-hour at the Old House Alison laid down her knitting.

"Grannie," she said gently, "I am going to the school treat, after all. I suppose Dr. Cary has told you."

"He has, my dear," said the old lady. There was such a sweet childlike look about Alison that nobody could be cross with her for long. "I am very pleased, and we will say no more about it."

"But, Grannie, I am sorry I was—insubordinate and impertinent."

Lavinia could not think how her niece could thus speak up before herself and the doctor—she herself flushed crimson as she glanced at Jim Cary, who, to her great surprise, was smiling.

"He ought not to do that," she thought. "It is not kind of him to look so amused when Alison is passing through such a humiliation."

"My dear," observed her grandmother, "there is nothing like a stern man for bringing disobedient folk to their senses. Womenkind are not strong enough for the job. I would have managed you myself if I had been younger, and it was with much pain that I was compelled to appeal to Dr. Cary. Nevertheless I am very grateful to him as I mark your changed demeanour."

"So am I, Grannie." Alison looked up again at Jim. And he understood.

"We will now change the subject," continued the old lady graciously, "and perhaps it would be a pleasant prelude if Lavinia were to sing us one of her songs."

"Yes, do, Lavinia," added Jim.

So Lavinia sang in her sweet, thin voice a song of lovers of long ago, and she thought of Jim as she sang, and the thought put a little depth into her weak voice, and fired a new spark in her pale blue eyes. And Jim forgot the singer in listening to the old words, which are always new in the talk of lovers; they drew his gaze to the bent brown head

of the girl on the footstool, and his heart went with it; till, with a start, he came back to thank Lavinia for her singing.

"Your coat sleeve is quite pulled out of shape," remarked Alison as they went in to supper.

"I do not notice to what you are alluding, dear," broke in Lavinia.

"It is not good manners to make personal remarks," said Mrs. Garland reprovingly; "I am surprised at you both."

"I thought Dr. Cary might like to know about his sleeve," answered Alison meekly.

"Thank you," replied Jim. "I do like to know about it."

"But I cannot see what is wrong with it," persisted Lavinia, whose curiosity for a moment outweighed the maternal influence.

"There is nothing wrong with it," explained the doctor; "only it has been pulled a little."

"A good deal, I should have thought," said Alison.

The day of the school treat was a beautiful one—a fresh breeze from the southwest blew a succession of white fleecy clouds across the sky, and prevented the atmosphere from settling down into that of an oppressively warm spring day. The sea seemed to brim over as it lay full and deep right out to the horizon line, and the lace-like pattern of breakers fringed the golden shore. The beauty of it all played on Alison's sensitive soul—all beauty in Nature appealed to her so strongly—and as she

and Lavinia walked across the sand-hills, early in the afternoon, the girl could not imagine how her aunt could be thinking of such things as cake and bread-and-butter, with such a view all round them. But she was, as her conversation showed.

“I do hope Mrs. Benbow has made the plum-cake wholesome,” observed Lavinia, with an anxious look; “the children will be sure to eat such quantities.”

“What does it matter?” answered Alison, rather impatiently. “As if the Barnscombe children could not eat anything.”

“And the bread, too,” mused her aunt; “that ought not to be too new.”

“Oh, look!” cried Alison, “at the patches of sunlight on those far hills. What an exquisite day it is!”

“I am glad it is fine for the school treat.”

“But it is much more than just fine,” said her niece; “it is so beautiful altogether. The colouring of Devonshire is marvellous.”

“I wish those clouds would not obscure the sun,” continued Lavinia anxiously; “they may indicate a shower.”

“Why, it is the clouds that give the shade and make it all so much lovelier; can’t you see it, Aunt Vinnie?”

“Oh, yes, my dear! It is a sweet view; but, you see, I am more used to it than you are.”

“Then that ought to make you love it all the more. I love Devonshire a thousand times better

than when I came here—I am getting to know all her moods. But even her tempers, when the west wind roars and the squalls break on the shore, are attractive. There is none of the bleak east wind you get in the north, nor the bitter, cruel cuts the cold gives you up there.”

“I declare there is Johnny Gregson running up the road. I do hope nothing is wrong with the buns. The carrier was to bring them out in his cart first, and then go for the baskets of bread-and-butter, which we cut this morning.”

“Dr. Cary would not let me cut any,” said Alison; “I told him I could. But he said I should cut my fingers, foolish man!”

“My love, do not speak so of James. I am sure his prohibition was dictated by kindness.”

“Don’t you think the weather is like different people’s characters?” the girl continued, reverting to her former subject. “Some are like fresh boisterous days, and some have a tinge of frost in the air. Petronel is rather that kind, don’t you think? Beautiful pale sunshine that ought to be warm, but isn’t half strong enough to warm anybody. And Lady Merrivale is like a very fitful, rather stuffy April day, with oppressive hot gleams and tiresome little showers. You are like a very still warm day, Aunt Vinnie.”

“I really cannot think of such fairy-tale ideas just now,” exclaimed Lavinia, hurrying along with a sudden impetus. “There is the man bringing the trestles for the table. There is to be one table for

the tea-urns to stand on and for the gentry to sit at."

"What rubbish; and just like the rector's red-tapeism! As if the gentry, as you call them, could not sit on the sand-hills."

"My dear Alison, how can you think of such a thing? James is coming, and he would not like to sit on the sand."

"Well, he could stand then. Besides, men always have to stand because of handing things."

"Make haste, Alison," cried her aunt; "he is putting the table in the wrong place."

Alison wondered how there could be a wrong place on that wide stretch of sand, but she forgot everything connected with the school treat the next minute, when the sun came out again and lit up the whole landscape in his golden light. The girl's heart beat quicker with the exultation of such a sight, and her lips parted to drink in the pure air which blew from over the sea. She was perfectly happy for the moment in her passionate love of Nature, and the chords it struck in her whole being. She stood still, absorbed with the joy of it all, and did not see Jim Cary drive down the lane on her right—nor the big waggons laden with school children which were coming from the village.

Lavinia also was perfectly happy, laying the table with dainty care, and putting little bunches of flowers beside the plates. She saw the doctor coming and gave him a gentle welcome.

"Doesn't it look lovely?" she asked eagerly.

"Simply glorious," replied Jim, sweeping the whole view with his admiring gaze, and taking off his hat, as if in the presence of such beauty he instinctively felt he had entered into the Temple of the Lord.

"I mean the table, James," corrected Lavinia, smoothing the cloth once more with almost loving fingers, and putting a sprig of hawthorn on the dish of cake.

He looked down and said, rather sadly :

"Oh, yes! You always make things look nice and pretty, Lavinia."

Her pale cheeks flushed with pleasure. She did not know that there was any higher praise than that which he had given her, and so was content.

"Do go and fetch Alison," she begged him. "Here are the children, and she is staying looking at the view from the sand-hills. I never knew such a girl in my life for views and out-of-door life and such things."

"I think there must be a gipsy strain in her blood," suggested the doctor.

"Not on our side," replied Lavinia thoughtfully.

"I meant on the Royses'," he explained, with a twinkle in his eye.

"Possibly. They were chiefly soldiers, though; I never heard of any gipsies. But I wish she would come now and help. She really ought to be more thoughtful."

"Or less," added Jim, as he turned to go after her.

Half-way he stood for a moment and glanced from the picture of Alison, now coming to meet him with a springy step, to that of Lavinia still hovering over the tea-table. The latter wore a clinging, lilac gown, of some soft material which hung in graceful folds, and a shady hat wreathed with roses. The distance between them gave back Lavinia quite ten years, and the picture of her pleased Jim Cary's eye. It looked as if the old days had come back again, and he smiled for a moment. Then, as he turned round, he felt that the old days could never come back again, but he smiled again, for the new ones were infinitely better and dearer. Devonshire must have been a dull and empty county then—he felt now it must have been, though he had not known it at the time. Alison wore a blue serge coat and skirt and a sailor hat. In a boyish way she ran up to him.

"Please, sir," she began, "I am going to behave very well this afternoon. It made me feel as if I should when I saw you coming."

"You are afraid of my scolding you again."

"I am not afraid of anything or anybody!" she replied, with a toss of her head.

"Oh, no! Not out here on the sand-hills. I know all about it."

"I really am not afraid of you when you look nice as you do now; but perhaps I am just a very little when you look——"

"Well, what?"

"Nicer!" she added, with a little laugh; and

then, "You really do look awfully nice and masterful and big and strong when you are angry—but you have a dreadful temper. You should not give way to it so much—it is very wrong."

"I shall shake you in a minute, and then you will be afraid on the sand-hills," said Jim, smiling.

"Fie, fie, Dr. Cary!" remonstrated Alison; "you forget we are at a school treat, and must behave as examples."

"That is exactly what I was contemplating—to make an example of you."

"How can you be so frivolous on such a lovely day as this?" she asked, with a sudden change of tone.

"It is a day to make one perfectly happy," said Jim earnestly.

"And a tiny bit sad, too," and the wistful look came into the girl's face.

"You are right, little one. Sunshine always makes a shadow somewhere."

"But it is a dear kind of sadness, all the same," she continued. "Just as a patch of shade is dear on a sunny day."

"It is one of our best feelings," said Jim; "but I don't know why."

"I like to feel sad when I know I am happy," Alison went on; "but when you are really unhappy you cannot afford to play with such emotions. It hurts too much."

"Poor child," he said, in a low voice; "I am afraid you know."

Then they joined Lavinia, and the rector, and the school teachers, and waited on the children till all the buns and cake and most of the bread-and-butter had disappeared. Afterwards Jim played cricket with the boys, and Alison "gathered nuts in May" with Lavinia and the girls till the sun sank in a crimson splendour behind the sea, and the pale cool light of a full moon came creeping over the hills and bringing with it the hush of evening. Then the waggons were reloaded with their tired, dirty, happy freight, and the great event of the year in the eyes of juvenile Barnscombe was over. But it left its traces in the digestions of the little Gregsons and a few of their friends; even the doctor himself did not come out of it unscathed, though it was not his digestion that had been affected.

CHAPTER IX

IN LONDON

"How awfully nice of Petronel!" exclaimed Alison, who had just opened her letter; "she has invited me to be one of her bridesmaids."

"It will be delightful for you, my dear," replied her aunt.

"Where is it to be?" asked Mrs. Garland.

"In London, Grannie. And oh! what do you think?" and she looked up from the last page, "it is actually to be in Westminster Abbey. How splendid!"

"In my young days a parish church was good enough for any girl," observed the old lady.

"I thought the Abbey was only used for funerals—great ones, I mean?" queried Lavinia.

"A great wedding is as good as a great funeral any day," laughed Alison.

"My dear, my dear!" interrupted her grandmother, "I cannot allow you to speak like that."

"I was only in fun, Grannie."

"That is precisely what I am reproving you for. Indeed you remind me more of a schoolboy than a young lady at times, Alison. It is very shocking."

"Dr. Cary says I am rather like a boy," observed the culprit meditatively.

"Oh, Alison!" exclaimed her aunt, "what a reproof from James! He thinks so much of womanliness. I am afraid you had been doing something very bad."

"I forget exactly what it was, Aunt Vinnie. It might have been sliding down the banisters, which I often do, or swinging on a gate, which I always do; but anyway he scolded me, and I was sorry."

"Much good being sorry did you if you already forget what it was for," remarked Mrs. Garland tartly.

"Oh! of course it wasn't the thing I was sorry for," explained her granddaughter, "but for being scolded. It was then he said I was like a boy."

"It is very good of James to take so much trouble with you, Alison," said her aunt.

The girl laughed.

"I believe men always enjoy scolding, don't you, Aunt Vinnie?"

"Oh, no, my dear! You are entirely mistaken. I know that James would never scold any one unless he were acting under a strict sense of duty, for it is a very painful duty, especially to so kind-hearted a man as he is."

"Does he ever scold you?" Alison asked her aunt, with some curiosity.

"You forget, my dear, that James and I are engaged to be married," and Lavinia drew herself up with conscious pride.

Alison laughed again.

"People always scold me," she said, after a moment's thought. "I suppose I am made that way."

"I am afraid they see you need it, child," remarked her grandmother.

"No one has ever scolded me—except, of course, Mother," observed Lavinia.

"Mother is the only person who has never scolded me," said Alison quietly.

Her aunt looked slightly embarrassed—she always felt so at the natural mention in common talk of any one who had died. She did not like them ever to be alluded to; but, if it were absolutely necessary, she prepared a very canopy of words which brought a funereal tone into the conversation, and made every one feel unhappy and uncomfortable. This was her idea of reverence for the great Mystery.

"What else does Petronel say?" asked Mrs. Garland, looking up from her watch, which she had been carefully studying while the eggs were boiling.

"A lot about her trousseau which I cannot read," answered Alison, returning to the letter, "and that the bridesmaids are to wear white with pink sashes, and that everybody is to be asked to the wedding, and that the presents are pouring in, and—not one word about Lord Conway. I am longing to see him."

"I consider a six weeks' engagement positively indecent," said Mrs. Garland severely.

"So terribly hurried," echoed Lavinia, who herself could not get ready in six years.

"Petronel has been so difficult to please," continued Alison. "She has told me about lots of her lovers, and why she could not possibly marry any one of them. I do wonder what Lord Conway is like?"

"I suppose a great many men have wanted to marry Petronel?" said Lavinia.

"She says so," replied Alison, "only somehow I never quite believe girls' tales about offers. They are so apt to multiply at compound interest. For any one who was capable of boasting of their number would be capable of adding to it, don't you think?"

"It must be terribly upsetting to have to refuse a man." The thought almost took away Lavinia's appetite. "I could never have done such a thing myself. It would seem so unkind."

"It would indeed," observed her niece demurely, "and one should try to be obliging in little things."

"But this is not a little thing!" exclaimed Lavinia; "it is an overwhelming one! I remember now how ill I was the week I accepted James!"

"Being a doctor he ought to have been able to cure you," said Alison, with a smile.

"Oh, my dear! What an indelicate suggestion! As if we could ever have spoken of such material and personal matters at such a time," and Lavinia looked quite shocked.

"It took you with biliousness if I remember

rightly," remarked her mother. "And I should like to see the biliousness I could not cure without any doctors or such rubbish." And the old lady looked severe enough to conquer a very plague.

"But I do believe Petronel has been very much admired," said Alison, reverting to her late theme; "she is so extraordinarily good-looking."

"She has a really beautiful face," agreed Lavinia.

"And the expression of a termagant," added her mother. "She will lead any man a dance who marries her, mark my words!"

"I do think it is nice of her to have asked me, when it is to be such a grand wedding!"

"You will bring no discredit on the grandest wedding that ever was, my dear," said Mrs. Garland graciously, "for you have a well-set-up figure and a face that will pass in a crowd. Though 'handsome is that handsome does,' remember."

"Oh, Grannie! you know it is not! I am ashamed of you for quoting that old copy-book rubbish."

"Upon my word, what are the young folks coming to?" and the old lady quite beamed through her spectacles. She was very much pleased at the idea of her granddaughter's being a bridesmaid at so important a wedding as Petronel Merrivale's was sure to be.

"I am going to London," Alison told Dr. Cary, whom she met in the village that day.

"What for?" asked the doctor sharply.

“To be one of Petronel’s bridesmaids. Isn’t it kind of her to have remembered me?”

“Remembered you! What nonsense! It is very kind of you to go.”

“Oh, Dr. Cary! how ridiculous you are! I am just longing to go.”

“There is a great deal of influenza in London,” said Jim, in a vexed voice. “I wonder Mrs. Garland has given her consent. I should not if I had been her.”

“Why are you so cross?” and Alison’s eyes were full of pathos. “Don’t you want me to have a treat?”

Jim Cary’s expression changed.

“Of course I want you to have a treat. Only,” with a short laugh, “I don’t want you to go to London.”

“Why not?”

“It is so far away, and—and such lots of things might happen there.”

Alison was young enough to want things to happen, so she said with a smile:

“And what if they did?”

“Oh, I don’t know!” exclaimed Dr. Cary impatiently, “no reason, I suppose.”

“I wish you would not speak as if you were angry,” and Alison looked up at him wistfully; “it takes all the shine out of my treat.”

“Then I won’t,” he answered, with the half-tender smile that was so often seen on his face when he talked to Alison. “Only you are rather

a little creature to go all that long way by yourself."

"I will be very good."

"And don't be altered even the slightest bit by all the newness and smartness of things up there," and he looked very earnestly at her as he held her hand in rather a prolonged good-morning, "but come back just the same. Promise, or I won't let you go."

"I promise—honour bright," answered the girl; and then she called back with a laugh; "but you could not stop my going if I wouldn't."

The doctor went on his rounds, but somehow Barnscombe looked a little different that day. A touch of sadness seemed to him to have come into everything, the kind of sadness that hovers over the last time, and spoiled the bright freshness of the first June day. A thousand worrying thoughts crowded into the brain of this man who had never had any nerves of his own before—absurd suggestions about railway accidents and infectious diseases made him restlessly anxious, and at the back of it all another fear lurked.

"Some fool of a groomsman will fall in love with her and carry her off," he muttered savagely, as he beat the heads off unoffending flowers with his stick, "and she will meet a lot of fast people and get into a horrid, smart set. I wish I could look after her—she has no mother, poor child!"

But that was not quite the reason why Jim Cary

wanted to look after Alison, though at that time he honestly thought that it was.

It was the evening before the wedding when Alison arrived at the Merrivales' London house.

"I say, here's a go!" exclaimed Robin, who was the first person to greet her in the hall. "I never thought they'd find a Johnny to marry Sis. I'm awfully glad you've come up to see the show. The cake is *AI*. Bags me to show it you."

"All right," promised Alison, "but not now; it is too late, and I want my tea frightfully."

"Her ladyship is in the boudoir," announced a solemn footman.

"All the rest of the shop is upside down," explained her youthful host; "we are going to dance to-night. I say, isn't it rather jolly of Lord Conway to marry Sis in the middle of a term? It gives me three days' holiday. The Head let me come up on Saturday. Rather decent of him, wasn't it?"

"Oh, my dear girl! I am so glad to see you!" exclaimed Lady Merrivale, "and I know Petronel will be. She hasn't seen you since she was engaged. She will have heaps to tell you."

"It was very good of her to ask me up," said Alison gratefully. "And of you too."

"You and her little cousin Celia are the only Barnscombe representatives—and a very creditable couple, I say. The Conway girls are such frights that Petronel said she must counteract them with her bridesmaids, or the wedding would be spoiled."

"The two Cartaret kids are going to be pages,"

explained Robin. "They'll be sure to kick up a row. What fun it will be!"

"You naughty boy, how can you?" and Lady Merrivale's voice was full of that helpless, half-encouraging tone of reproof that grown-up people so often assume towards the youthful forms of sin that happen to amuse them.

The dinner-party that night was quite a new experience to Alison. She felt all the excitement of entering a world where she had never been before, and she meant to enjoy every minute of it.

"Are you a great friend of the Merrivales?" she asked of the rising politician who was selected to take her down to dinner.

"Friend is a strong word," he replied, with a smile, "and a great friend is a prehistoric sort of thing that belongs to the days of Damon and Pythias, don't you know? But the Merrivales are most pleasant acquaintances of some three years' standing."

"Then they will never be anything more than acquaintances," said Alison.

Mr. Ridsdale looked round sharply. The girl seemed not only to have a singularly pretty pair of shoulders but a head on them as well.

"Once an acquaintance always an acquaintance, like clergymen and mortgages," he murmured; "but I thought that acquaintances sometimes grew into friends, just as thirty years ago I thought that ponies grew into horses."

"Things never really grow into something else."

"Pardon me, but that is just what they invariably do; the moment you get hold of a thing it always grows into something else. Amiable girls grow into ill-tempered wives: extravagant youths grow into economical husbands: dear old family friends grow into excruciating mothers-in-law: Arcadian flocks grow into tough roast mutton: and lamps which turn night into day in a Bond Street shop grow into the foul-smelling, smoke-breathing dragons which drive many an innocent and well-meaning man out of his petroleum-poisoned home."

"I don't believe you know what a real friend is," said Alison.

"Yes, I do. A real friend is a person to whom you read aloud all the verses that you write, and describe all the symptoms that you endure, and complain of all the servants that you employ. After a time he expects you to give him his turn, and to listen to his poetry, and diseases, and domestic worries. It is then that you discern that friendship is an empty form, and that the wintry wind is balmy compared with your friend's selfish treachery; for how can he expect you to listen to him in the same way that he listened to you? It is expectations such as this which strain friendship to the breaking-point."

"Oh, but if you were really friends you would think the poetry splendid, and be sorry for the symptoms, and sympathise about the servants!"

"My dear young lady, friendship and insanity are not necessarily convertible terms. Softening of

the heart does not always entail softening of the brain."

"It is just because you don't understand it that it looks like that. Things often do. For instance, what could seem more insane to the unmusical than a Wagner festival?"

"Nothing—absolutely nothing! I would rather even endure friendship than music. It does not last so long."

"And you can always feel that the ending of a friendship is in your own hands," said Alison, catching his tone; "but the ending of classical music is only a question of hope."

"And the caprice of an incarnate demon called a conductor, with a little white wand. You know that as men are mortal he will die some time, and he must stop then; but you have no idea when that will be, and why he should ever stop before."

"I am awfully glad you are not musical; I am not, and I was always afraid it was so dreadfully ignorant and stupid of me. Of course, I love the tunes I know, but that is the worst kind of unmusicalness."

"The man that hath not music in his soul," said Herbert Ridsdale, "is supposed to be capable of all enormities. I am that man."

"Are you capable of very bad things?"

"Of everything except shooting a fox, and that is only because I could not hit him."

Alison laughed, and her companion distinctly

enjoyed her girlish laughter; it reminded him somehow of the country in spring.

"And what is the woman who hath not music in her soul capable of?" she asked.

"That is for you to say. I know my own depths of possibility, but I have not plumbed yours."

"I wonder if any one ever really plumbed their own depths of possibility?" and the girl's face grew serious.

"I doubt it; and it is this which keeps one from becoming sick of one's self. It is rather interesting to know that you have got a latent poet, or murderer, or prime minister buttoned up inside your waistcoat, who may break loose at any moment."

"I think I would be sure it was a prime minister, and not a murderer, if I were you," interrupted Alison.

"But you can never be sure; that is where the interest comes in. It all depends upon circumstances. Does your party fall to pieces for lack of a leader?—out pops your prime minister. Does your tailor make your coat too tight and your trousers too short?—out rushes the murderer. Does some young woman happen to have eyes the colour of a jasper stone?—at once your poet appears full-fledged upon the scene."

"Then you believe that we are entirely creatures of circumstance?" said Alison dubiously.

"Absolutely! Here am I, for instance, a 'mute, inglorious Milton' and a 'Cromwell guiltless of my country's blood,' simply because I have never lost

either my eyesight or my religious liberty. And there are you, a mute, inglorious Mrs. Browning and a guiltless Charlotte Corday, simply because you were born after ringlets and revolutions had alike gone out of fashion."

"Oh, no!" interrupted the girl; "I think you are wrong there. I don't believe in mute, inglorious anybodies, because people who can do things invariably do them. A dreary London house and bad health are not enough to make a poet. The circumstances of a home in the loveliest country in the world, and being strong enough to live out of doors, as I am, would be much more poetical; only, you see, the poetry happened to be in Mrs. Browning, and not in me. Of course, she had a lover to write her sonnets to; but then so have most people, from the scullery-maid upwards."

"And every woman who has a lover does not write sonnets, thank Heaven! If she did, the terrors of love would be increased tenfold."

Alison looked at him curiously.

"I wonder if there is anything you don't make fun of?" she asked.

"Yes, my dinner, which is either a satisfying fact or a poignant memory."

"Tell me," she exclaimed suddenly, in a pretty, confiding way, "whether I ought to talk to the man on the other side now? It is a good thing you took me down to dinner, isn't it? or I should have been obliged to go in with a stranger. That is very Irish, but you know what I mean."

"It is a delightful compliment, and I think it is a very good thing that I was allotted to you, and one for which, along with the other incidents of the dinner, I am truly thankful. Who is the man on the other side?"

"I don't know his name. He seems rather a hungry person."

"Can't you read his name-card? He is old enough to have left it exposed."

"What has age to do with it?"

"Oh! my dear young lady, you have not been out long enough to know that it is a duty we all owe to society to leave our name-cards for the world to read, seeing that we are not yet sufficiently modern to have our names emblazoned on our shirt fronts."

"I don't think people's names matter much," said Alison; "the thing that matters is if they are nice people."

"Pardon me—I know that a rose by any other name would smell as sweet, but it would not be eligible for a prize at the rose show."

"I am not sure whether that would matter so dreadfully—it would be nicer to be a rose in a country garden that was allowed to die in its bed, so to speak, than a poor cut, wired bloom at the Crystal Palace."

"The world does not think so, and I am of the world, worldly."

"I am so sorry for the poor London flowers," continued Alison, glancing at the great bunches of

roses which covered the table, "for though they look so fresh and happy they are pinched by most uncomfortable wires and often killed by them, too."

"So are the poor London ladies," he observed dryly.

"I have just read the other man's name," she said suddenly; "it is Sir Gregory Garman."

"Then you are right, he is a hungry man. He has carried hunger to a science and the satisfaction of it to a fine art."

Just then Sir Gregory addressed her.

"I am sorry to see you have let the plovers' eggs go by you. May I not call them back?"

Alison laughed.

"I could not eat eggs at the end of my dinner," she said, "because I am only accustomed to eating them at the beginning of my breakfast."

"But not plovers' eggs, my dear young lady."

"Do they taste different from a fowl's?" she asked innocently, with a twinkle in her eye.

"Taste different!" and he gazed at her in astonishment over his spectacles, almost feeling that she had been guilty of an irreverence. What right had so young a girl to speak familiarly, almost disrespectfully, of plovers' eggs?

"I know all about the outsides of birds' eggs, of course," she continued, "but the insides seem pretty much alike—when you blow them."

Sir Gregory by this time had recovered his first shock.

"A plover's egg," he said solemnly, "is one of the greatest delicacies it is possible to enjoy, and one of its greatest charms is that its season is so limited. We can force strawberries and asparagus and green peas till we are eating them nearly all the year round, but plovers' eggs cannot be forced," and he looked sadly after the retreating dish.

"My favourite thing to eat is ices," adapting herself to her companion with a readiness worthy of her sex.

"Ruinous to the digestion!" gasped Sir Gregory.

"I have often made them for myself in the winter with snow and raspberry jam," she confided in him, "or with orange juice. But the worst of snow is that it has a taste of dust like your fingers smell after you have been touching old books."

The worthy baronet regarded her with the tolerant amazement that men only extend to the infantile or to the insane, and promptly changed the subject.

"What part of the country do you come from?" he asked.

"Devonshire. It is the most perfect country in the whole world. Do you know it?"

"I was staying in South Devon not long ago, close to Dartmoor."

"Oh, tell me what the prison is like inside! I am so much interested in gaols."

"I am sorry I can't oblige you, but I have never been inside a gaol in my life."

"That is greatly to your credit," said Alison demurely.

"I do not see that. As it happens, I have never been one of the visiting Justices; had I been, I should not have neglected my duty."

When the ladies at last rose to leave the dining-room, Alison followed them, feeling cleverer than she had ever done in her life before; and the feeling pleased and excited her. But during the next half-hour in the drawing-room, where every one was talking about things she did not understand, such as the merits of a person called Kate Reily, and the charges of Redfern as compared with those of Russell and Allen, and where no one took the least notice of her presence among them, Alison began to feel herself a long way from home. She watched Petronel curiously, and wondered what the change was in her that was too subtle to describe but too strong to ignore. She was surprised that her friend could appear so gay on her last evening at home, and thought that if she had been Petronel she should have wanted just then to be alone with her mother and not in the midst of such a crowd of acquaintances. "Only somehow Lady Mervivale does not seem like a mother," she said to herself, as she looked across the room to where her ladyship was the central figure of a very noisy group.

A voice on the left startled her.

"So you are an old friend of Petronel's?"

"Yes, I knew her down at home," and Alison's

tone suddenly softened as she thought how dear it was down at home.

"Lady Merrivale is marrying her daughter well enough to satisfy even her extravagant ambition," continued the lady. "But it has been a difficult game for her to play."

"I don't quite understand you."

"There has been a good deal of thin ice to skate over, don't you know? Conway is not a very attractive person, and Petronel has a will of her own; she jibbed a good deal at one time."

"Do you mean to say that Petronel is being forced into this marriage?" asked Alison, aghast.

The lady laughed a short, hard laugh.

"Young ladies nowadays do not require much forcing into a marriage with an earl who has twenty thousand a year."

"I am sure Petronel would not marry him unless she loved him. She is not that kind of girl."

"Oh, wouldn't she, my dear? That's all you know. Besides, there is nobody living who could love Conway. But I knew that Lady Merrivale meant business from the first. Ah! here come the men. Now look at Lord Conway yourself and imagine any one's loving him," and she laughed more loudly than ever.

Alison found a sudden sick sensation in her heart. The bridegroom-elect was a little, rowdy, unwholesome-looking man, with a manner that made the girl shudder, and a loud slangy way of speaking that seemed out of place except in a stable yard.

"He is like a horrid, low groom," she thought to herself; and she looked at Petronel, who was more beautiful than ever, a bright spot of colour burning in her cheeks, and a cold glitter in her eyes.

Then the truth of the strange lady's statement broke into Alison's soul, and all the pleasure and brightness of the scene were spoiled to her. When Herbert Ridsdale came up and spoke, she could only answer in monosyllables, it seemed such a long time since she had talked and laughed at dinner. The dance afterwards was so rowdy that Alison grew more wretched still. She was frightened and homesick, and even Robin's merry face failed to bring her the sense of comradeship they always had together in Devonshire.

"I do wish Dr. Cary were here!" she kept saying to herself; and the wish was so strong that it seemed to tear a hole in the very tissues of her being. She knew just how he would have looked had he been there—a head above his fellows, and with that commanding way which made him always seem the most important person in the room. And she knew, too, that he would have taken care of her, and shielded her from the noisy chaff and rough practical jokes that the Merrivales' set considered such fun.

"Little girl, you are tired," said Sir Gregory Garman, looking kindly at Alison's white face and mournful eyes, though her lips smiled in a wintry way, and she tried to talk easily to her partners.

“Yes, I am,” she answered quietly; “I have come on a long journey to-day.”

And it was a longer journey even than from Barnscombe to London—a journey that takes us out of the first sunny land of simple belief in high ideals, into the foul, heated atmosphere of low ambitions and sordid triumphs, and the care of only earthly things. We feel a wave of sorrow and pity for its poor inmates as we pass through some dirty slum and see what ugly lives have to be lived there; so Alison felt depressed and saddened by the ugliness of the lives about her then. She had never imagined before that mothers could sell their daughters, and women barter their lives for such things as money and rank and social success. She had always believed the best of everybody, and would not even listen to Lavinia’s mild criticisms on Lady Merrivale and Petronel’s frivolity, because they were her friends. She was too young then to know that there is another point much farther on the way of life, from which, because the view is wider and the height greater, we still see, and so are right in believing in, the best of everybody.

It was between two and three in the morning when the festivities at last were brought to an end.

“Good-night, girls!” and Lady Merrivale’s voice rang with her coming triumph. “Early to bed, for we must all be up early to-morrow. That is the worst of having to be married before three o’clock; we shall have to be down so early.”

Petronel went with Alison into her room. The

girls had hardly spoken to each other before, as the coming bride was upstairs trying on her wedding-dress when her friend arrived, and so they had met only in the drawing-room.

"I have never properly congratulated you, dear," said Alison, kissing her. "I hope you are really happy?"

"Of course I am," a little sharply. "Don't you know that Conway is the catch of the season?"

"Oh, yes! I know that it is a brilliant match," continued Alison wearily. "But you do love him, don't you, Petronel?"

"We don't mean to bother our heads much about love"—with a short laugh—"he will go his way and I shall go mine. And there aren't finer diamonds in England. Mother says I never ought to cease to be thankful for them. I can wear diamonds, too," and she glanced at herself in the long mirror with a proud look of satisfaction.

"But diamonds cannot make you happy!"

"What nonsense! I, for one, could not be happy without them. You are a perfect baby, Alison, in your ideas; but, of course, you can't learn anything of the world in that little west of England hole and corner."

"Yes, I can. I have learned that there is something better than diamonds in the world. And I wish that you would learn it too before it is too late," and her flash of indignation faded at the quick touch of pity for her friend.

"My mother knows more about the world than

you do, and she says the great thing is to marry well, and that you will be sure to get to like each other quite enough afterwards. Besides, she says it is silly and old-fashioned to marry for love, and I should be sure to be wretched if I did. This was when a man I knew in the Guards was about a good deal, and I rather liked him. But he only had his pay and enough of his own to keep him in cigars and button-holes."

"Did you like him better than you do Lord Conway?" asked Alison breathlessly.

"Of course I did. What a silly question! He was big and good-looking, and did not talk everlastingly of jockey and bookies as Conway does. And he never made me feel at all bored or sick. It was a pity he was so poor!"

"Cannot you do anything while there still is time, dear?"

"I wish you wouldn't be so tiresome," a little fretfully. "Of course Mother knows best."

"What does Lady Merrivale say about the man in the Guards?"

"That I can have him to stay down at Conway Royal. It will be fun then!"

Alison's eyes were full of tears as she kissed her friend good-night.

"I am afraid I don't quite know how to congratulate you properly," she said softly, "but I want you to be much happier than you hope."

"You are a good little thing," and Petronel looked half-amusedly at her friend's pale face with

the tumbled hair about it that gave her such a childish look.

"I am older than you are, anyway," replied Alison, smiling.

"But years younger in experience and knowledge of the world, and all that kind of thing, you know. Still, I am glad you have come to be my bridesmaid."

"Thank you, dear. Good-night."

"Go to sleep quickly to be ready for the fun tomorrow."

"The fun!" repeated Alison to herself, as she tossed about trying to go to sleep. "Oh! I have such a nasty taste in my mind! I wish I were at home again."

And some of those at home—for all Barnscombe was home—were wishing it, too.

CHAPTER X

A WEDDING

ALISON woke very early on the following morning, with that sense of an overshadowing cloud which is always the heritage of a trouble the preceding day has brought. And then there came a reaction, born of fresh air and cold water, which drove the night before and all its fears a long way off, and assured her that things must be all right when seen through the sunshine of a new day.

“I dare say Petronel really cares, but is shy of showing that she does,” she decided as she brushed her hair, “and no doubt Lord Conway is quite nice underneath, and all these horrid suggestions are only a kind of fashionable chaff. It was silly of me to mind.”

So do things change their colour in the morning light. Everything looks different and fresh, even a familiar garden or the well-known London streets, and artists tell us that the reason is that all the shadows lie on the opposite side of things to that on which we are accustomed to see them later in the day. Perhaps, too, that is the reason why thoughts and feelings also are freshened, and in a way made

new. The shadows which lie before us in the evening, as we wander away from the sunset into the night, lie behind us in the morning as we walk along in exactly the same direction, our faces turned towards the coming day. As Alison stood at her open window she drank in the sweet fresh air that seemed to have been dropped down from heaven just to cover the trees and grass of the park, so that they might forget that they were not really at home in the country; and she watched the dear little dirty town sparrows chirping and fighting over whatever they could pick up for breakfast, and hopping about in the gutter in preference to the grass, as only town-bred creatures could. The haze of smoke had not yet risen from countless kitchen chimneys to blur the beauty of the summer morning's sky, and none of the houses had opened their eyes to look out on the ceaseless panorama of the London streets. By and by quaint calls were heard from those whose wares were wanted early, and Alison stood watching with sympathetic insight the wonder of the great city's waking moments. It stirred, stretched, and shook itself, as some huge giant who has slept; and then sat up with open eyes and smiled, and London was awake.

"I say, you are down early," and Robin greeted her in the big, empty dining-room at nine o'clock.

"It is late for me. Grannie always breakfasts at eight."

"I am jolly glad it is fine, aren't you?" continued the boy," with his mouth full of broiled kidneys.

"A wet day would have been horrid!"

"Rather! I say, don't look at me during the service. I shall laugh to a dead certainty if you do. A friend of Petronel's, an awfully rich girl, was married the other day to a chap with about twopence a year, and when it came to him to say, 'with all my worldly goods I thee endow,' all the bridesmaids sniggered. Jolly good joke, wasn't it? With the boot on the other leg like that!"

"I hate jokes of that kind," replied Alison vehemently. She was not going to listen to any more which would not leave a nice taste behind them.

"They are awfully funny up here," argued Robin; "Mother screams at them."

"You don't think them funny; you know you don't!"

"Oh, well! I know they are not funny like the jokes we have at school. Rowing chaps and fooling the new kids, and all that kind of thing. But grown-ups think them frightfully funny," the boy persisted.

"Dr. Cary wouldn't think them funny."

"I suppose not. But then he never seems so awfully grown-up as the fellows Father knows. He will talk to me, you see, and they never will."

"I think he seems a great deal more grown-up," argued the girl, "and that is why he can afford to talk to children, and enjoy doing so. But you never heard him make a horrid, cheap joke in your life."

"No, and yet he is a sight jollier than other people. I wish Sis had been married at Barns-

combe, and then he would have been there." And breakfast was finished quite amicably, before they went to examine the presents.

"Look at this!" exclaimed Lady Merrivale, waving a photograph frame in the air. She was putting a last touch to all the arrangements. "Did you ever see a poorer, meaner, more rubbishy little thing in all your life? The Pettits ought to have been ashamed to have sent this one-and-eleven-penny-halfpenny affair. I wish I had never invited them."

"It is silver," suggested Alison.

"Silver!" with a scornful gesture; "the little dog is evidently a lost one in this case, for I have looked for him in vain."

"It's a lion, mother," explained Robin, "not a dog."

"I have carefully examined all the silver," continued her ladyship frankly, "and most of it is sterling."

Alison looked surprised. She was old-fashioned enough to think that one should not look a gift-horse in the mouth. But then she had never been at a smart wedding before.

"And actually Mr. Webster sent a book of his own poems! Did you ever know anything so sickening? I expected at least Apostle-spoons from him. Nasty, shabby old thing!"

"But there are heaps of exquisite presents."

"Of course some of the people were bound to give decent things—all Conway's aunts and uncles.

It was a bright idea of mine inviting that rich, vulgar old man we met at Cannes. He has forked out well with a diamond bangle."

"Oh, what a dear little picture!" exclaimed Alison, picking up a sketch of a country lane. "Why, it is one of our Barnscombe lanes. Look, Lady Merrivale," excitedly, "don't you recognise that gate just below the blacksmith's cottage? Who painted it?"

"George Lumsden," referring to the card. "I don't think much of it myself. It was never even in the Academy."

"But it will remind Petronel of home. I should love to have it if I were she."

"What did Dr. Cary send?" Robin wanted to know.

"A first edition of somebody. I forget who, but it is a very valuable one and beautifully bound. I wish he could have come up. I'm always awfully fond of Jim."

"Why couldn't he come?" Alison asked quickly. "I did not know he had been invited."

"Oh! some tiresome old woman in the village was dying and he wouldn't leave her. Poor people are always so inconsiderate. And if she was dying, what good could he do by staying with her? But that is just like him. Always so unpractical!"

Alison did not say anything, but she felt a sudden breath of bracing air, and a glow of exhilaration. "That is just like him," she repeated to herself, for she knew how he would have loved to come

up with her. And then her pride in him suddenly failed, and she began to think how much nicer everything would have been if he had come up; and how she wished Betsy Gregson had not been dying; and then, with a rush of shame, how horrid she herself was to be thinking just what Lady Merrivale had so much shocked her by saying.

"This makes the tenth button-hook," said Lady Merrivale resignedly. "They are popular offerings from younger sons—eighteen-and-six in a case. Never mind, they will do for Petronel to give as Christmas presents for the next few years."

"She would never give away one of her wedding presents!" exclaimed Alison.

But Lady Merrivale had flitted on.

"Mercy on us!" they heard her scream, "here is a garnet brooch! Petronel never told me of that. I dare say she never saw it. What an awful thing!"

"Grannie sent it," and Alison's cheeks grew very pink. She knew as well as Lady Merrivale did that it was an impossible ornament, but she also knew that her grandmother had valued it since her girlhood, and that it had been with a pang that the old lady had at last decided that it alone of her scant possessions was worthy of being reset and presented to so important a person as the future Countess of Conway.

"Poor little brooch!" said the girl tenderly, as Lady Merrivale went off with many apologies. "I wish you were safe at home again in Grannie's jewel-case!"

And then she smiled as she thought of the old soap-box which was dignified now as Mrs. Garland's jewel-case. And somehow the garnet brooch reminded her of Lavinia, and seemed to tell a sad little story of how few places there are in the world for the old-fashioned, unattractive people when once they leave the home where they are so much admired, and considered eternally young. And Alison felt afraid that the experience of life would be as hard on her grandmother's daughter as on her grandmother's brooch; for she knew deep down in her heart that her aunt had lost the power of attraction that she must have had as a girl when Jim Cary became engaged to her. She saw that he was more than content now to go on in the old way without any thought of marriage; and she realised that Lavinia would have to be content with a place among her mother's treasures in the old soap-box, instead of resting in a beautiful jewel-case of her own. So her heart was full of a great pity.

The pageant of the wedding itself was more beautiful than Alison had ever thought possible. The long white procession of the choir, brightened by the scarlet cassocks of the boys and the clergy's crimson hoods, came first; then the bridal procession, with Petronel at its head looking more beautiful than ever, and the tiny train-bearers and eight bridesmaids following, with a perfect garden of pink roses in their hands and waving white feathers in their hats. The magnificence of the Abbey itself, and the triumphant swell of its organ, filled Alison's soul

with that thrill which follows in the wake of great beauty or power everywhere. She saw the gayly-dressed, whispering crowd only dimly, as some rustling mass of flowers banking the aisles, and she felt that it was more really "in the sight of God" than "in the face of this congregation" that the solemn bond was being riveted between two lives. The plaintive hymn brought tears to her eyes, and Petronel's whisper that she would "love, honour, and obey," drove all the ugly thoughts right out of Alison's head, and left a reverent wonder at such sweet mysteries in their stead. And Lady Merri-vale breathed a sigh of relief, and bent her neck—the only portion of her body she was capable of bending in her best gown—at the last prayer with a feeling of profound thanksgiving that she had won her heart's desire—a really eligible son-in-law—in spite of every difficulty. Then the procession filed down again towards the big west door, and the crowd hustled and pushed, as only a well-dressed crowd can, to see the last of the bride and bridegroom.

"Ha, ha! awfully glad that's over. Beastly nervous job!" laughed Lord Conway to the few who were illustrious enough to enrich the register with their names.

"Come on!" said Petronel impatiently, as she swept out.

She gave one glance up the nave towards the chancel, where she had left her liberty and her ideals and the few girlish hopes that her mother had been

unable to destroy ; and then, with a proud gesture, she turned towards the man who could afford to pay her price, and smiled as she walked beside him ; but her smile was not a pleasant one to see.

Alison had never imagined that so many people could be crammed into one house as were to be found at the Merrivales' on this occasion. It seemed to her more like a congregation moving step by step to the church door than a private party. But then she was not a London girl.

"Here, my dear," called Lady Merrivale, who could hardly move in the packed drawing-room, "Mr. Lumsden wants to be introduced to you."

"Lady Merrivale tells me you live at Barnscombe," he began. "I loved Barnscombe once upon a time."

"I love it now," Alison answered, with a happy smile ; "it is my home."

"Whereabouts is your home there?"

"The whole place is home to me—fields, lanes, sand-hills, and, above all, the seashore. But my address is 'The Old House.' Mrs. Garland is my grandmother."

"Indeed! I was there a long time ago."

"I am so glad! It is very nice to meet some one who knows Barnscombe. I am rather homesick away from it." And a wistful look crossed her face.

"Have you been up here long?"

"Oh, yes!" But then, with a sudden laugh, "How silly I am! I only came yesterday, but it

really does seem a dreadfully long time. So much has happened, and I have seen so many people, and it is all so big and new. I can't believe it was only yesterday that I was at Barnscombe station."

"I used to know a dear little girl down there," George Lumsden continued regretfully, "who was so sweet and gentle, and as lovable as she was lovely. Poor little soul!"

"What happened to her?" Alison asked in almost a whisper, for the artist's face was so sad.

"Her mother killed her," he said slowly, glancing towards the centre of the room where the new Lady Conway was holding her court, and receiving endless congratulations.

"Oh!" exclaimed Alison, with horror, "how terribly sad! I wish she had died instead."

"So do I," replied her companion earnestly; "I thought at first she had; but that was before I knew the truth."

"I never heard of such a dreadful thing!"

"There are many dreadful things we do not hear of; but that does not prevent their being true, all the same."

"I suppose it was a long time ago?" queried Alison; "I was never told about it by any one."

"I am not sure how many people knew about it, except myself," he answered. "The mother herself does not know."

"Then she did not do it on purpose?" exclaimed Alison with a tone of relief.

"My dear Miss Royse, we all have a certain

knowledge of inevitable consequences ; and if I were to set fire to your muslin dress because I said I thought it would look pretty in a blaze, that would be no excuse when I was convicted of burning you to death."

"Poor, unhappy mother!"

"And all the poorer," he added gravely, "because she does not know how much she is to be pitied."

"What a sad story!" and Alison's face was full of sympathy.

"And the saddest thing is that stories such as this are being written every day, and nobody ever takes the trouble to read them. The dear child that has been given to many a mother is lost for ever."

"Oh, no!" replied the girl earnestly, thinking he referred to death, "what God takes care of for us is not really lost, you know."

"But what we ourselves deliberately throw away is. I wonder," with a slight smile, "why I am talking to you like this?"

"I don't know," and Alison looked up at him inquiringly.

"Perhaps it is because I feel that you would understand more than girls of your age generally do. Anyway, it is too bad of me on a festive occasion like this."

"Oh, don't turn it all into nothing but a party, too!" cried the girl. "A wedding is such a solemn thing, and everybody here seems to think it nothing but a joke, and as if there was no deeper thing at all."

Even her mother does not seem to mind losing Petronel a bit."

"Lady Merrivale has had a far heavier loss than to-day's," continued George, "and she did not mind that either."

"Oh, I am so sorry! I did not know. And somehow it makes it more pathetic when the people themselves do not mind, don't you think? because it shows they do not understand."

"There are some things we have no right not to understand. Always remember that, Miss Royse."

Alison looked a little puzzled. She liked this sad-faced, serious man and the way he talked, though she felt she could not follow all his meanings.

"You painted that portrait of Petronel, didn't you?" she asked, as they drifted into the dining-room with a stream of hungry guests.

George Lumsden smiled.

"Yes. Do you think it is anything like her now?"

Alison looked long at the picture.

"I see her clear-cut features, and the same lovely blue eyes, and the golden curly hair, and the flower-like colouring; but—there is something in that baby's face I can't find in Petronel's. What is it?"

"The promise of what she might have been," answered the artist; "it was wiped out long ago."

"I believe Petronel is nicer underneath than she seems," said Alison loyally.

"You are her friend."

"She has always been very kind to me."

"When you go back to Barnscombe, give a nice message from me to Jim Cary."

"Do you know him, too?" And the girl's face lit up with a happy light.

"He is an old friend of mine. What does he do with himself now?"

"Oh, heaps of splendid things! Nothing is done without him. Indeed, Dr. Cary is Barnscombe somehow; he is so identified with everything and everybody there."

"And Barnscombe is home," said George to himself. "Poor, silly Lavinia! But I am glad, nevertheless," and he glanced admiringly at Alison, who was looking very fresh and bright and sweet in her bridesmaid's frock. It was her face, pale with emotion, the tears trembling in her big brown eyes, that had attracted him to her in the Abbey, and made him seek an introduction afterwards.

"A girl of lights and shades," he described her to himself, for now her eyes were twinkling, and her cheeks bright with colour. "Jim won't get tired of her! Nothing has happened yet or she would not have spoken of him so enthusiastically. But something will happen soon, or she would not have done so either."

Which showed that George Lumsden had even more than the subtle swiftness of an artist's eye.

"I can't eat any more, I simply can't," said Robin sadly, as he came out into the hall, where the guests were assembling to bid the bride good-bye.

"It is an awful pity to be allowed and yet not able to, but I can't even go one more."

"I am sorry for you," said the artist; "to have opportunity and yet to be unable to make use of it is a bitter experience."

"I wish I had a dozen sisters, so that they might all have good old weddings like this. It has been ripping, hasn't it?"

"But a dozen peers might not have been forthcoming to marry them," suggested George.

"Oh, Mother would have routed them out somehow. And even if she hadn't, you can have a jolly wedding whatever the fellow is. Conway hasn't had much to do to-day, you see."

"Oh, no!—a mere trifle. You did not happen to listen to the service in the Abbey, I suppose?"

Robin looked surprised.

"Rather not. I didn't think anybody had to."

"You are quite right. There is no compulsion."

"I say, here comes Sis," continued the boy. "Let's clear the way."

A hush fell over the whole company as the girl came down the stairs. The bridesmaids, like dainty policemen, lined the way from the staircase to the door and kept back the crowd.

"Good-bye, my sweet darling!" cried Lady Merrivale, pulling Petronel's hat to a slightly more becoming angle.

"Good-bye, my dear," said Sir Robert, kissing her clumsily, and fussing about round the carriage

to hide the strange feeling of emotion which made him for a moment uncomfortable and depressed.

"Good-bye, good-bye," echoed many friends, and a hailstorm of rice pelted Lord and Lady Conway as they took their seats in the carriage.

So Petronel drove away into her new life with a hard smile on her beautiful face, and Alison stooped down over her flowers to hide a tear for the friend who was going so far away.

"You do well to congratulate me," Lady Merrivale's voice was heard saying to some one, "for to-day is the proudest one of all my life."

"Good-bye, Miss Royse," said George Lumsden, as he passed towards the front door. "Give my love to Barnscombe. And remember that China is not the only country where mothers deliberately slay their baby-girls."

"What is Lumsden talking like a missionary to you for, my dear young lady?" asked Mr. Ridsdale, who had come up in time to hear those parting words.

"Perhaps because he thinks I need one," replied Alison, with a quick laugh. "There are plenty of heathen left in Christendom, I suppose."

"So I have heard. But George seems to me a funny apostle. Still, things are not always what they seem. Ah! here is dear Lady Merrivale, wishing her guests would go home with all her heart."

"I should like to shake my Paris gown and shoo you all out this very minute," confessed her lady-

ship, "for the tune of that tiresome hymn and the smell of this stuffy bouquet have both got into my head till I want to go and take it off, and have a nice long rest before the opera to-night. I wish we could take off our heads every now and then, it would be such a relief."

"Some of us solve the difficulty by carrying them empty," replied Herbert Ridsdale.

"I can't laugh at anybody's jokes for at least twenty-four hours," she continued, "my cheeks are so stiff with smiling all day that they, too, must have a rest. Oh! you dear man, are you really going? How sweet of you! Do take a friend or two with you, and come and see me on Sunday afternoon to talk it all over."

"You will stay with me for a little, won't you, Alison dear?" she begged the girl, as they sat alone drinking tea in the boudoir. "I shall be so lonely without Petronel."

"I must be going home soon; they will want me."

"My dear, that is nonsense. What on earth is there to want you for down there? And besides, I shall be dull without a daughter. Do stay with me just till the end of the season. It is only for a few weeks."

Alison hesitated. There was much in London she would like to see, and it did seem rather unkind to refuse Lady Merrivale just then. So a letter was written consulting Mrs. Garland, and when the old lady's peremptory command came by return that

Alison was to avail herself of this splendid opportunity to see something of the world, the girl decided to enjoy it while it lasted, and make the most of all there was to see and learn and know and do up there.

CHAPTER XI

THE REST OF THE SEASON

ALISON and her hostess were sitting in state waiting for the stream of callers to begin to pour in, for it was Lady Merrivale's afternoon at home.

"I have been thinking over my plans," began her ladyship, "and the first thing I have to do now is to marry you well, my dear."

"You are mistaken there, I am afraid," exclaimed Alison quickly, "for nothing would induce me to be hawked round as one of the season's wares. I will play at all the other games you like to suggest, but I can't think of love as one of them."

"I suppose you are old-fashioned enough to imagine that marriages are made in heaven even in these enlightened days?" laughed Lady Merrivale.

"I think that if Providence has to arrange the first and last column in the Times, the middle one surely can be similarly managed," replied Alison, with spirit.

"But I do so adore match-making!" with a sigh.

"Well, then, you must get another girl for whom to match-make. I am sorry to appear disobliging,

but one can't marry just for the sake of good manners," said Alison, smiling.

"I know what I will do!" exclaimed her ladyship, with sudden delight. "I will invite Sylvia Desmond to come and spend a week or two with us. She is a very nice girl, with no principles and lots of brains. And she is clever enough not to show she is clever, which so few girls are."

"I don't see what is the good of being clever if the only thing you can do with it is to hide it!" remarked Alison.

"Good gracious, child! I wonder what you will say next? Of course it is all the good in the world. Men hate clever girls for being clever, and stupid ones still more for being stupid; so the only thing is to be clever and to seem stupid, and then every one adores you."

"But I should hate people to adore me for what I was not," persisted Alison; "it would be like cheating."

"My dear girl, life is one colossal cheat, and the sooner you learn the rules of the game the better."

"Oh, no, Lady Merrivale! I am not going to believe that—any more than you do really. There is a lot of masquerading, I know, but it deceives nobody, and so it is only like huge, private theatricals after all. But nearly every one, when you get to know them below the surface, is better and nicer and truer than you thought."

"I have met with exceptions to that rule," ob-

served the lady dryly. "You are fortunate if you have not."

"I said nearly every one," repeated Alison, "and I mean it. For though my experience is such a little piece, it is, after all, a piece of the whole, and so the component parts are the same as if it were much bigger."

"I shall get a headache if you begin talking about component parts, my dear. It is almost as bad as environment."

Alison laughed.

"Let us have Sylvia Desmond to stay. I should like to meet a girl you think so clever, and whom society adores."

"She is frightfully amusing, too," continued Lady Merrivale, "and the very essence of up-to-dateness. I always wanted Petronel to copy her, for she is just the daughter I should have chosen; only it did not really matter, because Petronel played off her beauty, and she could not have married better even if she had been as clever as Sylvia. Perhaps not so well, for Conway would have been so overpowered by much in the way of brains."

"It was much better for Petronel to be herself and not copy any one," said Alison. "I don't think it matters what type a person is, if only they will be perfect of that type, and not a shoddy imitation of somebody else's."

"Very likely that is so. You have learned a thing or two, my dear, in spite of that baby face of yours. Good gracious! There goes the front-door

bell, and we shall not have another moment's peace for hours. I could never have managed to be at home if you had not stayed to help me. I do hope the tea is not any nastier than usual. How do you do, Lady Garman? So sweet of you to come on my day!"

Then up came other callers, and so on without any cessation till there was barely time to dress for dinner.

"What would not I give for curly hair!" sighed Lady Merrivale, "for think of the hours it would save me of spirit lamps and curling tongs. And there is our scullery-maid with a halo of crisp little curls which would be priceless to me and are no good to her at all—and the hotter she gets the more her hair curls. Truly the ways of Providence are past finding out."

When Sylvia Desmond came to stay, she was a liberal education to Alison. She was extremely pretty in a dainty Parisian way, and she was also, as Lady Merrivale had said, extremely up-to-date, and considered her cigarette as the hall-mark of her modern femininity.

"Were you ever in love?" she asked Alison one morning.

Alison caught her breath: she did not like to see fools rushing into those holy places where her angel feet had as yet feared to tread. She was still very old-fashioned in her beliefs, and the more she saw of society life, the more she hoped she might always continue to be so. The simple, beautiful truths her

mother had taught her were stronger and more sacred than ever. For so do the first dear lessons of childhood, learned from our mother's lips, grow with our growth, and strengthen with our strength, till, as men and women, we are sheltered by the shade of some great tree, and find, perhaps to our amazement, that it has sprung from the seed planted by those loving hands which ministered to us so long ago.

"Oh, no!" she replied; "but if I had been I should not talk of it, you know."

"How queer!" exclaimed Sylvia. "I have been scores of times. It is the only thing that a woman has to amuse herself with now that pigeon-shooting has gone out."

"That is nonsense," interrupted Alison. "There never was a time when women had so many amusements as now. Look at all the out-of-door life to begin with."

"If you call it amusement to get boiled with heat and your clothes messed and your hair out of curl, which most of your out-of-door amusements entail, I can't agree with you." And Sylvia blew rings of smoke through her delicate Grecian nose, and looked with half-closed eyes at her companion. "I was having tea at the Mexican Legation the other day, and the Minister's daughter agreed with you. She said that girls in Mexico have nothing else to do except go to Mass and get married, but English girls have other amusements. She rather envied us, I think."

“But being in love is not just an amusement,” interrupted Alison. “It is something too sacred and solemn and beautiful even to talk about to most people.”

“Not it!” observed Sylvia scornfully. “It is the best game in the world, and nothing more; and it is simply idiotic to pretend it is anything else. If you do, you will get your fingers burned and your forehead lined and your fringe grizzled, and serve you right!”

“I don’t believe you have ever been in love in the real sense of the word?” queried Alison, smiling.

“Haven’t I, though? I have felt lumps in my throat and thrills down my back and steam-engines in my left side; and if that isn’t love, I should like to know what is?”

“I can’t tell you, I am afraid; for I only know what love is not—until I know what it is, I suppose. And you won’t teach me that. But I believe that it is something more than what you say.”

“It isn’t, I can assure you—from one who knows. And if you go on expecting that it is, you will be disappointed; and if you are disappointed you will look as if you were disappointed; and that is most frightfully unbecoming. Besides it is silly to make disappointments for yourself. It is like the people who make bereavements for themselves.”

“How do you mean?” asked Alison.

“Don’t you know the people who adore little dogs and love them much better than all their relations, and then when the little dogs die, which they

have to do in a few years at most, there is as much weeping and grieving and mourning as if they had lost their nearest and dearest?"

Alison nodded.

"So don't you be as silly in the manufacture of disappointments. The world generally proves quite generous enough in that direction. And a woman who is disappointed is a woman with a story; and a woman with a story has quite gone out of fashion."

"Has she?"

"Rather! Now a woman with a past is a different thing," continued Sylvia. "It is awfully *chic* to have a past. I am not sure that I wont have one myself when I am a little older. But it is not at all *chic* to have a story."

"What is the difference?" Alison wanted to know.

Sylvia pondered for a moment, poisoning her cigarette between her slender, rose-tipped fingers.

"It is rather difficult to define; but I should say that a woman with a story is a woman who has bowled while the man batted; but a woman with a past has batted while the man bowled. And it is only the batters who score in the game of life, you know, and only those who are 'in' who have a good time!"

Alison tossed her head like some impatient horse who has to stand still at Hyde Park corner on a bright, crowded afternoon, when his instinct is to be galloping over an open country with the breath of the fresh wind in his nostrils.

"I don't believe that you have ever been in love," she repeated, "or that you know anything in the world about it really."

"Don't I, though, my dear Miss Royse? I have been in love scores and scores of times. In fact, I am in love now, though I cannot for the life of me remember for the moment who with."

"Oh! then, I beg your pardon," interposed Alison, with a touch of derision, "I see I was mistaken. Do let me benefit from your profound experience."

"For the future," Sylvia went on, "I shall really have to put a book-marker in my feelings to show how far I have got and whereabouts I am. It is so tiresome to be in love with somebody, and to forget who it is!"

"One can't be expected to remember details in this crowded London life."

Sylvia took no notice of the interruption. "Now of all the men who are in love with me at present, the most devoted is Bertie Ridsdale. It must be the real thing in his case, because it has lasted for quite six months. Even yet he keeps all the flowers that I have given him. He showed them to me the other day; they looked just like the dried mint that you put in pea-soup—don't you know?—to make it even nastier than it is by nature. I always wonder why people take so much trouble to make nasty things still nastier; such as taking sweet sauce with venison, and trimming up old dresses, and living with their own relations."

"Nastiness seems fashionable," said Alison.

"Lady Merrivale went to order something at Gunter's the other day; when they described the savoury, she said that it sounded very nasty, and with much reproach she was informed that of course it was nasty or no gentleman would take it."

"And was it?"

"Extremely. I could not resist sampling it at the party, and it tasted something between a bathing-machine and a sneeze."

"Oh, I know exactly!" and Sylvia laughed a thin, silvery laugh. "I believe *chefs* use a good deal of old rope and tar and sea-water nowadays."

"And lots of paper and gravy for the entrées."

"But to return to Bertie Ridsdale," Sylvia continued, "you can't think how dear and devoted he is!"

"Are you going to marry him?" Alison wanted to know.

"No; he has not enough money to be married. He is sweet to make love with; but he will have to be sacrificed in the end—like a pig that you know will have to be killed at Christmas, whether it is a white pig or whether it is a black one. Even if you make a pet of it, it will still have to be killed."

Alison's eyes flashed.

"How horrid! I hate to hear you say such things!"

Sylvia knocked the ash off the end of her cigarette, while she laughed softly.

"You really are green. You talk as if men were human beings, instead of being either nasty and

possible husbands, or else nice and impossible lovers."

"I dare say I am," said Alison impetuously, "and I thank heaven for it, if being green means still believing in things and people. I like jokes and fun as much as you do, and laughing at what is really amusing. But I can't see the charm of cheapening what is of real value just for the sake of showing a gay and gaudy shop-window."

"Everybody does," continued Sylvia. "It is the correct thing."

"It seems to me," continued Alison, "that it is the exact opposite of the policy one pursues at a bazaar. Then you put an enormous price on quite ordinary things because a friend has sent them. But society makes a thing of no value at all if it happens to be given by a friend."

"Because you can always get plenty more, you see. Friendship, or rather love, for that is what we are discussing, is like a shop at which we have a bill—unlimited things can be put down in it."

"And when the bill is sent in?" suggested Alison.

"Oh, it never is! What a *bourgeois* idea. Besides, it is an advertisement for them, poor things, if we will wear their goods for a time, and they ought to be very grateful to us."

"Well, I don't suppose we shall ever agree," and Alison's eyes smiled. "But that is no reason why we should quarrel."

“It is much too hot,” agreed Sylvia; “how sensible of you!”

A few days after this Lady Merrivale took the two girls for a drive in the Park. Alison watched the interminable procession of carriages with a tired wonder. She was growing rather homesick in the midst of this gay world, and Sylvia's coming had made her more so. For Alison felt unhappy in an atmosphere of selfishness and lovelessness; and the girl's bitter comments on the hollowness of life made her long unutterably for the dear, west country where she felt so safe and happy, and believed so implicitly in the beauty of both this world and the next. But Sylvia Desmond was in her element: she nodded to this carriage, and waved her hand to that, and made remarks about the other, looking like some alert, gay, little bird who has never known what weariness means. Still, had she been left to the company of the buttercups and daisies at Barnscombe, with no conversation to listen to save the mysterious murmuring of the waves, which only tell their secrets to those who have ears to hear them, she would have known what weariness meant as well as Alison knew it now.

“I wish you would sit by Lady Merrivale,” Alison had said to Sylvia at starting, when the inevitable demur about taking the front seat occurred.

“Not I: I had rather sit on the market-side, thank you; it makes me seem so much younger. I am two years older than you in fact and two hundred older in experience; but as long as I look as

young, what does it matter? Men work out women's ages by faces, you know, not by figures, as they do other sums."

"What do you mean by the market-side?" Alison wondered.

"Oh! did you never hear that expression? It means the side of the carriage where the marketable goods are exposed for sale. The married ladies sit with their faces to the horses, and those who want to be married with their backs to the horses; which means, I suppose, that we don't know which way we are going, nor where it will land us."

Lady Merrivale laughed.

"My dear Syllie, how killing you are! I never meet any one who amuses me as much as you do."

Sylvia bowed her pretty head in acknowledgment of the compliment; it was her rôle to amuse, and people always like to be congratulated on their successful performance of that part which they have cast for themselves to play.

"Look, there is the Dowager Lady Crowbar!" she exclaimed, "in a bonnet ablaze with poppies! Doesn't she look just like a very old village church decorated for a harvest festival? Oh! and there is Mrs. Wentworth, sitting in the shadow of her own nose as usual. It must be like a perpetual parasol in hot weather, or a chronic awning."

"How absurdly you talk, dear child!" said Lady Merrivale appreciatively.

"And there is Jennie Armitage," the girl rattled on, "in an elegant frock of fawn grass-cloth

trimmed with red, just as if she had been erected for the school board by the London County Council. What are we pulling up for?" as the carriage suddenly stopped and the horses were drawn back on their haunches.

"That is the best thing in the Park," exclaimed Alison, with a sparkle in her eyes, as she noted the reason of the policeman's outstretched hand, which kept back the proud procession of horses and carriages. A tiny, ragged girl was wheeling a battered perambulator, in which sat a wizened old-faced baby, and a little bare-footed boy was clinging to her tattered skirt. A pitiful and typical group of the great crowd of London slum children, who are old men and women almost before they have learned to stand on their weak little legs. They were crossing over from Knightsbridge and wanted to reach the grass on the other side of the drive. And in the great capital of the greatest Empire in the world, the arm of the law was held up in the face of rank and strength and riches to help three tiny ragged wayfarers to walk safely along their appointed path. Alison felt a thrill run through her and a ridiculous lump in her throat at the sight, and all that it meant.

"How tiresome these beggars are!" exclaimed Sylvia impatiently. "They ought not to be allowed in the Park at all. I dare say they bring no end of infection, which we are exposed to afterwards."

Alison was silent. She felt a sudden pity for the stylish, popular, smart girl opposite to her—the pity

that we feel for some blind person on a day of glorious colour, light and shade.

“It must be so dreadful,” thought Alison, “only to see people’s hats and frocks and horses and carriages, when there is so much else to see. I shall tell Dr. Cary all about this—I know just how it will appeal to him!”

Alison kept a cupboard in her mind and memory stored with the things she wanted to tell Jim Cary, and she enjoyed every fresh addition in looking forward to the pleasure of taking it out again with him.

“Let us draw up under the trees,” Sylvia was saying, “it would be so much cooler.”

She had caught sight of a group of men she knew, on the chairs not far from Hyde Park Corner, and among them Alison recognised her old friend, Claud Curtis. They instantly came up to the carriage and began to talk.

“What! you here?” exclaimed Claud, his face alight with pleasant surprise. “This is an unexpected joy.”

“I have been with Lady Merrivale for a month,” said Alison rather coldly.

She had grown a good deal since Claud gave her sketching lessons, and she was consequently better able to take care of herself.

“I must have a talk with you,” he whispered, as Lady Merrivale and Sylvia were chatting to Herbert Ridsdale and Sammy Head. “I have so much to say.”

"Have you had tea?" Sammy was asking the others.

"No," replied Sylvia, "all the people we have called on have been out. Of course we were glad not to find them at home, but we should have liked some tea. I do wish it was the custom, if the family are not at home, to invite the visitors to join the servants' hall or the housekeeper's-room tea-party. I am sure the conversation would be quite as good as it is in the drawing-room, and the tea infinitely better."

Sammy nodded.

"Well, then, come and have tea in Kensington Gardens," he said, in his drawling way. "I will entertain the whole party, these two coves as well, and if you are good you shall have buns."

Sylvia clapped her hands.

"I should love it," she said; "food eaten out of doors always tastes young and wholesome, and makes you feel good."

"Buns make me feel too good for this world," said Sammy. "Not just at the time, but afterwards, don't you know?"

"And how do buns make you feel?" asked Mr. Ridsdale, looking into Alison's clear brown eyes.

"Sticky," she replied with a smile, but rather a far-away one, for she was thinking how dreadfully long ago it seemed since she had first met Herbert Ridsdale at the dinner-party. And the homesickness grew suddenly stronger.

"Sammy shall drive with us," said Lady Mer-

rivale, "because he is a good boy and the host. You two go and get a hansom and follow."

So they pulled up before you get to the bridge, and joined the garden-party which goes on all the summer at the southeast corner of Kensington Gardens. And they had a merry time, for Sylvia and Sammy vied with each other in absurdities, and the others laughed at them, and put in their own oars when they could.

"I once had a breakfast-party here," said Sammy, "when I was young and foolish. It made me two enemies for life."

"Then you ought to have known better," chimed in Sylvia, "than to suppose friendship could survive a breakfast-party. It is a strain even on family life."

"It is indeed," and Sammy spoke feelingly. "My governor is always punctual and hungry, two terrible breakfast attributes; and he thinks his family undutiful if they are not both also. I might manage one on alternate mornings, but both at once do stump a chap."

"To sit opposite the window is bad enough in the morning," said Lady Merrivale, "but to be out of doors in the full, early light is simply suicidal."

"I know," and Sammy nodded. "I never sit facing the light at breakfast; my complexion won't stand it."

"What is your specially becoming light?" asked Sylvia; "mine is candles."

"Moonlight," replied Sammy seriously; "it does

my pallor justice. I have a small niece who once saw me by moonlight, and she daren't go to sleep for a week. Untempered electric light is the next best thing for me."

"It is ages since I saw you," Claud interposed in a low voice to Alison; and then as her face indicated no special interest, he added: "I have been very ill since then—at death's door."

"Influenza, I suppose?" she queried pleasantly; but mere pleasantness was not what Claud wanted.

"Influenza and complications," he replied, in a hollow voice, "many complications! My temperature was 103°."

"I am afraid that conveys no idea to me," she said with a smile, "for I am dreadfully ignorant about such things. If you had said that your temperature was thirty or a hundred and thirty, I should have been equally impressed."

"I remember every word of our talks together last year," he continued, as Alison failed to rise to the heights of sympathy he required on account of his late temperature.

"Then you have a better memory than I have," and she laughed in his face. "But tell me, what are your pictures this year? I looked out for some signs of Barnscombe at the Academy, but Lady Merri- vale was in a hurry and we had no catalogue, so I never found them."

"My art has suffered by my suffering, Miss Royse. How can one realise the great ideals of fancy when chained to a sick-bed? And then I had

to go abroad to seek my health again. It has been a bad year's work for me, and such a disappointment that the picture we planned together is still untouched."

Claud refrained from mentioning that his bad year's work included several very lucrative portraits, and also that the period during which the influenza had chained him to a sick-bed was exactly ten days.

The others were listening to Sylvia's ceaseless comments on the occupants of all the tea-tables in sight.

"Look at those old maids in gray," she was saying. "Isn't it funny that people with bad complexions invariably wear gray? And how frightfully their skirts hang! Do you know I really cannot respect a woman whose skirt hangs badly; it always means that she is thoughtful and intelligent and self-sacrificing, and I can't endure thoughtful, intelligent, self-sacrificing women. They lead such dull lives as old maids, or else become good wives and mothers, which is duller still."

"Perhaps they only seem dull," suggested Mr. Ridsdale.

"Old maids are such fussy creatures," said Sylvia, pouring out another cup of tea; "always having their houses cleaned and things like that. Life to an old maid must be one interminable Saturday afternoon, so to speak."

"Well, that is better than an interminable Sunday morning," Sammy chimed in.

"Have I offended you in anything?" Claud whispered to Alison. "You seem to be passing me by somehow with only a bow of recognition. And we used to be such friends," reproachfully.

"Of course you have not. What an absurd idea," she replied indifferently. "We are only out of touch because we have forgotten each other."

"But I have not forgotten you," sighed Claud. "I have thought incessantly of you; even in my delirium I said what I am sure I meant for Barnscombe, only the nurse did not quite catch it." And for the moment Claud was really moved by this picture of the intensity of his devotion.

"What is that you are saying about delirium?" interrupted Sammy. "It is an awfully interesting thing, I have always heard, for chaps reveal the secrets of their hearts and talk of girls you never knew they were even gone on. My brother was once delirious and he kept raving for a little girl we knew called Frisky Cotton—at least my mother said he did; the nurse said it was whisky he was raving for, not Frisky. And the governor preferred that it should be so."

"When I have a house of my own," Sylvia said to Mr. Ridsdale, "I shall never have the rooms cleaned at all. I think it is so tiresome and fussy, and the servants hide all your things so that you can never find them again. They do it to punish you for being inconsiderate enough to want them

cleaned, I believe. I shall keep birds to pick up the bits off the floors."

"An admirable and most cleanly arrangement," murmured Mr. Ridsdale.

"Oh, look at that old lady crossing the road!" cried Sylvia suddenly; "and the height she is holding up her dress because the roads are quite clean."

"Glimpses of the invisible are revealed to me," observed Sammy.

"Isn't it funny how the older a lady is the higher she holds up her dress?" continued Sylvia. "I have often noticed it."

"It is a good job, then, that this one isn't any older," drawled the cricketer.

"People are frightfully amusing to watch," Sylvia rattled on. "I wish we could play some game here; but we can't, because it is London. The last time we went to the sea a lot of us sat on the pier and stuck a clean new postage stamp on to the ground, and then waited and watched. It was killing! The British instinct could not pass by so priceless a thing as a new postage stamp without a dive after the treasure."

"Did any one scratch it up?" asked Lady Merivale.

"Some one always did. One stuck specially fast, I remember; but a girl flew at it and scratched like a rabbit, with furtive glances round to make sure no one could see her."

"Which of course they could not, seeing she was bent double in the middle of a pier on a sunny

morning," Sammy chimed in. "An ostrich, I believe, has a similar belief."

"Here come two nuns!" exclaimed Sylvia, whose quick eyes were roving round like some hungry hawk's seeking for food with which to satisfy her wit. "Don't they look like beetles? I should hate to be a nun."

"I don't think the part would suit you, somehow," said Sammy slowly, "but I may be mistaken."

"Now, children, I must be going," and Lady Merrivale broke up the party. "We have all enjoyed ourselves immensely, Sammy, and will return thanks to you instead of Providence on this occasion."

"I am going to walk home," said Sylvia, with a glance at Herbert Ridsdale.

"Then may I come with you?" he asked promptly, and they strolled off together.

"Won't you walk, too?" Claud begged Alison. "I have so much to say to you, and cruel chance and circumstances seem determined to keep us apart."

"No, thank you. I am tired," said Alison, following Lady Merrivale to the carriage.

"You don't know how miserable you have made me," he sighed as she stepped in.

And he nursed his misery for as long as the barouche was in sight, and Alison's little brown head and waving feathers were so daintily outlined against the clear blue of the sky. Then the car-

riage turned into the Mile and was lost among the others, and Claud hailed a hansom.

"She does not realise," he murmured to himself, "that I left her because I loved her. Few men would have so considered her interest. It is hard to be misjudged, but it has ever been the lot of those of whom the world was not worthy!"

"Isn't that Royse girl pretty?" Sylvia asked her companion, as they walked together over the grass.

"Awfully. And in such an original way of her own. She has the air and carriage of a duchess, and the little, fresh, sweet face of a country child."

"She is a nice girl, too," continued Sylvia. "The sort of girl that makes you think of trees, and flowers, and hymns, and peaceful, soothing things like that."

The man sighed.

"She does. She is the sort of girl that makes you remember all that you once meant to be, and to recognise how far you have travelled in the opposite direction."

Sylvia looked up at him through her long eyelashes.

"You seem to admire her," she remarked.

"I do; almost more than any girl I have ever seen."

"How nice of you! I didn't know you had such good taste."

"You misjudged me, you see," he observed, swinging his walking-stick round and round. "Even if one is not a rose oneself, one is capable of

feeling all the better for being near the rose, and learning how sweet it is."

"I wonder you don't settle down and marry a nice, domestic, country girl like Alison," said Sylvia sweetly.

"For the very good reason that a nice, domestic, country girl wouldn't have me."

"You can't tell. Nobody knows what a fool a woman will make of herself till she has the chance."

"There is a limit even to the folly of women."

"She would make you very happy," continued Sylvia. "She would read aloud the Bible and Blackwood to you, and she might even know how to darn your stockings. You would like all that sort of thing."

"Perhaps I should," dryly.

"You would find it so restful." Sylvia's delicate nostrils were a little dilated as if she scented a battle from afar.

"That also is possible. Even men sometimes are tired."

"And she would believe in you—she actually does in lots of people—and obey you, and consider you an ideal hero. You would adore that kind of thing."

"No, I should not. Again you misjudge me; I am not an utter scoundrel though I may appear to be one."

"She would think that you were a sort of Liebig's Extract of King Arthur, flavoured with Bay-

ard, and served with sauce *à la* Francis of Assisi," Sylvia went on mockingly.

"Oh, dear, no, she would not! Now you are misjudging her."

"Why wouldn't she?"

"Because, as I remarked before, there is a limit to the folly of woman."

"You had better go and make love to a girl of that kind," said Sylvia, nodding her head wisely; "it would be by far the most sensible thing you could do."

"There I certainly agree with you."

"Then that is settled, my dear Bertie."

"Pardon me, it is nothing of the kind."

Sylvia raised her pencilled eyebrows.

"Why not? Surely you want to do the best for yourself?"

"But I don't. I want to do the worst for myself," he replied, and the girl was surprised at the emotion in his voice.

It was not the fashion to feel things—or at any rate to show that you felt them—in Sylvia's set; but Herbert Ridsdale was not the first man who has had his better nature roused by one woman only to waste it on another.

"Don't you want to make love to a really nice girl who will admire you and respect you, and make you feel happy?"

"No, I don't. I want to make love to a heartless little flirt, who will gibe at me, and jeer at me, and throw me over for a richer man in the end, and

make me feel utterly miserable. But I don't care if she wipes her shoes on me or tramples me in the dust, if only she will let me go on worshipping her."

Sylvia laughed that careless laugh of hers.

"Well, you are an old goose, Bertie! I wouldn't have believed it of you. Do you mean to say that you like this horrid girl better than all the nice ones?"

"Yes."

"But why?"

Herbert Ridsdale shrugged his shoulders.

"Because there is no limit to the folly of man."

CHAPTER XII

HOME AGAIN

It was Alison's second coming home to Barnscombe.

The season with all its dust and glare and heat was over, and there was the used-up feeling about everything and everybody which so surely comes in town with the end of July. The girl pined for the fresh air and out-of-door life from which she had been shut out for two long months, and still more for the sweet, homely atmosphere of the Old House, and the sympathy and understanding of—she was going to say “Grannie and Aunt Vinnie,” but something stopped her. And when she searched down into her feelings for what was the truth, she knew that it was the sympathy and understanding of Dr. Cary's friendship that she missed so sorely and wanted so much. No schoolgirl ever looked forward to the holidays with more delight and excitement than she did, and it was with positive joy that she packed up all her finery and left out the simple blue serge and sailor hat which she so often wore at home. We all understand the immense difference there is between going back to a place we

know, and going to it for the first time. The tender touch of association turns wayside pictures into the illustrations of our own life's story, and peoples the empty places with the dear presences of those we love. And even when the shadow falls across the old familiar scene, and memories of summer are the only autumn flowers we can find, yet our own gardens will be different from all other gardens, however fair, and will always be set apart for us as holy ground, until we, too, are transplanted into our true home country, where the old associations still await us, and will be the first flowers that with great joy we find.

Alison sat at the carriage window drinking in great gulps of the sweet, fresh air, and thinking how good it was to be going home. And as the train ran over the river's bridge through one of the quaint old North Devon towns, her heart beat faster, and a smile of expectation shone in her eyes and curved her lips. She could see now the winding, white line which was the high road along which she had so often walked; clumps of trees under which she had sheltered during a passing shower; cottages whose inmates she knew as neighbours. There is always a fascination in tracing our movements from quite a different standpoint—looking out from the train for places where we have once been on foot—seeing for a moment the little gate which was so high and big when we stood beside it to watch the express rush past. And Alison felt all this, and something much more, as the familiar landmarks flashed by, and she knew that Barnscombe was very near.

The tall, gray tower of the church up on the hill looked like the figure of a friend, and in the far distance on the other side lay a silver streak which was the sea she loved so well. The train slackened and stopped; and it seemed an intrusion for such a big, noisy, steaming thing to be in that little wayside station, where the platform is a flower-garden and the roof big boughs of the trees. And there was Lavinia in a new cambric gown, and Grannie in her best bonnet and white shawl, and Jim Cary with a flower in his button-hole, all come to welcome Alison back again.

“You have grown, my dear, I do declare,” exclaimed Mrs. Garland, as they turned to walk homewards.

Jim Cary saw in an instant that Alison was looking pale and tired and thin, and deep down in his heart he was glad that she was neither so well nor so happy in the gay London world as she was in the peaceful country one at Barnscombe. He had looked forward to her home-coming with such mixed feelings; gladness at the thought of seeing her again, and fear lest she should have outgrown the old friendships, and be more of a fine, fashionable lady than the girl who was growing so dear to him. No one who saw him standing at the station with that easy, graceful air, talking in his pleasant way to Mrs. Garland and Lavinia, could have guessed the tumult of his feelings underneath. He was an impossible man to read, and he always appeared master both of himself and of the situation. But he

was not master of that aching anxiety which had begun to rack him since he imagined that Alison would bring home with her a love story, and so things would never be the same again. There was nothing to be seen in his manner but a friendly greeting as he clasped her hand; but there was a catch in his throat and a wild gladness in his heart at the sight of her small, white face, which told him a sad little story of homesickness—the best story in the world that he could hear.

“It is like Heaven to come home,” said the girl softly; “I was growing so tired of being at school.”

“At school, my dear?” exclaimed Lavinia; “I do not understand you. You have not been at school, but enjoying a London season and all its delights.”

“It is rather like school, Aunt Vinnie, and a school with a dreadfully modern side. I was not a bit a clever girl in it.”

“Cleverness does not seem to me quite a womanly quality,” said Lavinia, “though, perhaps, it is ignorant to say so.”

“There are plenty of different kinds of cleverness,” explained the doctor, “and we must make the best of what we have, without bothering our heads about whether it is manly or womanly.”

“I suppose the God who made us men and women knows best with what qualities to endow us without our criticisms and advice,” chimed in Mrs. Garland.

"How much you'll have to tell us," continued Lavinia, "of all your experiences."

Jim Cary felt a sudden chill. Perhaps there were experiences after all.

"I have heaps of surface things to tell," replied Alison; "but I am tired of surfaces and show and smartness. I have learned a good many things up there, but the best is how dear my home is here."

"I am very pleased to hear you say so," remarked her grandmother, "for I have known girls very dissatisfied with their homes after visiting richer and more fashionable folk, and full of complaints of everything that is simple and homely. Give them a powder and send them to bed is my advice with the girls as well as the children. I always acted that way with your mother and Lavinia when they were small and had been to a party, and it soon put a stop to the grumbles."

"I feel as if I should never leave off smelling the sweetness of this country air," exclaimed Alison, holding up her head to draw it in.

"We must not linger on our way," interposed Lavinia, "or the ham and eggs will be overdone."

"Do you really mean it is like Heaven to come home?" Jim Cary asked the girl, in a low voice, as they went up the garden path.

"I do. The best imitation of it that we can get down here."

"And you haven't grown a little tired of old friends?"

"No, but very tired of new acquaintances."

“And—and you are not different, are you?” and in his voice was a pleading cadence.

“I don’t think so,” answered Alison simply, “except perhaps that I want you all so much more.”

“It is like Heaven to have you back,” he said earnestly.

And Alison felt a warm glow of gladness rush through her whole being. She realised then for the first time how good it was to have Jim Cary at her side, and how much better still it was that he should want her so.

“And is London very dreadfully dazzling and wicked?” asked Lavinia, in an awe-stricken voice from behind the tea-pot.

“Not that I saw,” explained her niece. “It is gay and smart and bright, and in some sets brilliant, too; and there are many expensive luxuries and cheap ideas, but it seems to me that people are very much the same everywhere. Little Sally Benbow at the harvest-home supper here is just as empty-headed and frivolous as some of the girls at the State balls—and it is pretty much the same thing to keep company on one’s Sunday-out with not always the same swain, as to flirt with a lot of men at once as Sylvia Desmond does.”

“I always thought a London ball must be so very wicked,” observed Lavinia.

“It is very hot and crowded and tiring,” laughed Alison; “but I never found out that it was wicked at all.”

"Dear me, how strange!" And Lavinia's pale blue eyes were opened wide in astonishment.

"You are very silent to-night, James," remarked Mrs. Garland.

"I am listening," he replied, with a smile of pure happiness.

"You are not feeling ill, I do trust?" chimed in Lavinia anxiously.

"Ill!" exclaimed the doctor. "I should think not! Where are your wits, Lavinia, to imagine such an absurdity? I have never felt ill in my life."

"But, James," she continued, "that is no reason. Our turn must come, and the passing of time only brings it nearer to each one."

Jim Cary frowned slightly, till Alison broke in:

"Oh, Aunt Vinnie, how doleful you are! And, besides, some people never are ill, so it is no use your prophesying illness to such strong people as we are."

And the introduction of the pronoun "we" made Jim feel as if he never could be ill or vexed in such a beautiful world.

"You do not look over strong, my dear, just now," said her grandmother. "So thin and pale. I shall make James doctor you up a bit."

"Oh, I am all right, Grannie! And I shall soon get a colour again down here."

"I will look after her, Mrs. Garland," said the doctor, with a glad ring in his voice.

And Alison felt she should like to be looked after

by Jim Cary. She had stood by herself for such a long while now, and she was very tired.

"What kind of things do people in London talk about?" asked Lavinia, who felt that Alison had become a kind of modern encyclopædia.

"Themselves and each other. Especially each other, Aunt Vinnie, just as they do in the country. And they talk a lot of clever nonsense, and a little clever sense. And the clever folk talk cleverly about everything."

"And the stupid people stupidly about everything, I suppose," interposed Mrs. Garland.

"No," said Alison thoughtfully, "I think the difference between London and the country comes in there. The stupid people are taught somehow to catch on, and so hide their stupidity. They learn their part even if they are not clever enough to compose it. You see there is no sitting still mentally in London, and so less danger of going to sleep."

"So, though clever people will be clever wherever they are," added Dr. Cary, "stupid ones will be less stupid in town."

Alison nodded.

"It is one gigantic system of cram for those who haven't brains enough to pass without it; but it does prevent stupidity all the same. Even the sheep in Kensington Gardens are not stupid. They have sad, worn faces, and cough like Christians, but they are not half as stupid as the country ones. They don't rush away in a frightened herd when an inoffensive old lady walks by, as they would in a

field, or expect people in bath chairs to hunt them. I used to admire the sense with which they would gauge a person's character before they deemed it necessary to stroll out of the way."

"But did not you get to know any wicked people at all?" said Lavinia, with a shade of disappointment, as they all adjourned to the garden, and sat under the trees in a dark patch of shade.

"I did not get to know many people well enough to find out," answered Alison, smiling.

"Tell me whom you did get to know well?" said Jim Cary quickly.

"And how wicked you thought they were?" added Lavinia.

"Sylvia Desmond pretended she was wicked," began Alison, "but she was too young really to be so. It was only showing off. She wasn't a very nice girl, but she tried to make you think her much worse than she was."

"And who else?" Lavinia wanted to know.

"A Mr. Ridsdale. He was not a bit wicked, but really very nice. He was my first friend up there."

Jim's face clouded over, and he felt a sudden sick, sinking feeling that even the cleverest doctors do not know how to cure.

"I hope Sylvia will marry him some day," continued Alison; "he is tremendously in love with her."

And Jim's sickness was cured by the miracle of her simple statement.

"Then there was Sammy Head, and a Mr.

Lumsden, who sent many messages to you," turning to Jim, "and I saw Mr. Curtis again once, and Lord Conway, and loads of other people who only counted as chorus."

"How do you mean?" asked Lavinia, with a puzzled look.

"They never took any solos in my piece. It is difficult to realise that everybody takes a leading part in somebody's play, isn't it?"

"My dear, I do not approve of so many theatre expressions," corrected her grandmother.

"I used to like to see the poor little shop-girls hurrying off to the A.B.C. shops to meet their young men in the dinner-hour," Alison went on. "They were such shabby, squalid little romances, but romances for all that."

"People ought to have the country to make love in," said Jim. "It is their right, just as spring is. It is sad to think of the crowded A.B.C. shops, and all the empty stiles and lanes."

"They should start a lovers' country holiday fund," suggested Alison, "for they need it as much as the children."

"A fortnight only costs ten shillings," Jim reminded her, with a smile.

"It would cost less with lovers," she replied, "for children are hungry, but lovers are not."

"And who else did you see?" asked Lavinia, who never liked the conversation to drift into unpractical channels.

"Oh, there were lots of kind, exhausted moth-

ers, who were so tired of taking their daughters to parties; and any amount of boys—good boys and naughty boys, I suppose—not old enough to be really wicked, but young enough to think it grand and manly to appear so. And many hard-working fathers, and a few pompous old millionaires, and I think that is all.”

“We must not ask you any more questions to-night,” said the doctor gently. “You ought to go to bed, for you are fagged out.”

Alison smiled up at him. It was so sweet and restful to feel that there was some one to take care of her, and that she was enough of a child again at home to be sent to bed. But, even after she was upstairs, she lingered at the open window, and seemed as if she could not shut her tired eyes on the scene she loved so dearly. She knelt with her arms folded on the window-sill, and her head resting on them. Her thoughts flew back to the London world, which already was being pushed behind her into the distance of the past; for so soon does it become natural to us to be at home again even after a long absence. She wondered whether she had learnt the lessons which every experience in life is sent to teach us, and also what these particular ones might be. And in the hush of the summer starlight she felt that touch with things eternal which is so often forgotten in the glare and rush and chatter of the day's work and play. So the chapter of her London season was folded up and put away with just that shade of sadness without which we can

never write the word "finis" anywhere, nor yet turn over a fresh, clean page of our life's record, even though we may have great hopes of the story that will be written there.

In a couple of days Alison felt as if she had never been away. The physical joy of living, which the country and the sea know how to kindle so quickly, came back to her, and brought with it the merry young-heartedness which is so soon stamped out in the society of town. The colour was burned back into her pale cheeks, and the tired look round her eyes washed completely away. She was not a bit changed, everybody said, but Jim Cary found a difference, though it was to him she had specially promised she would continue the same. There was the old Alison still that he was so fond of, but there was a new Alison who drew him with far stronger cords. Though we, in our timid dread of change, want things always to be the same, we find that they cannot really continue so. Earth so often writes change and decay together, that we perhaps rightly shrink. But there is a change in the things that earth cannot touch, which is always for the better—a change in friendship as it sinks deeper into our hearts; a change in love as it swells stronger and rises higher; a change in beauty as we see farther; a change in knowledge as we learn more. To this change we can ever look forward with gladness and faith, and this was the change Jim Cary found in his feeling for Alison—a dearer one than any which he had imagined possible. To both of them, how-

ever, it was not a conscious change. They knew that they were ridiculously happy, and that there had never been so sunny a summer-time before; but they neither exactly knew why. It was enough that they were together again after so long a separation, for friends always want to be together. They did not realise that feelings often grow strongly and quickly under the surface, and the seed changes to the plant long before it is visible above the ground. They were content thus to enjoy each day as it came and the wealth it brought with it of the things that Ruskin tells us make men happy.

Such walks they had in the lanes and on the cliffs, through the country, and best of all down by the sea! And Lavinia was often too busy to go with them. The long distances tired her, and she had so much else to do in the garden and workroom and pantry at home, the neglect of which distressed her. It was a comfort to her to know that Jim Cary was not also neglected, for that would have distressed her almost as much. And so things drifted on, the current flowing faster as it neared the whirlpool.

"I don't ever want to go away from home any more," said Alison, as she and the doctor stood one day at the gate looking at the view stretched out before them.

"I like to hear you say that," he answered quickly, "for I was so afraid for you in London."

"It was very nice and amusing and interesting

and all that, you know," she continued, "but it was rather poor compared with—with looking at such a view as this."

"This is a perfect view." But he was only looking into her face as he spoke.

"It seemed so funny to me to be on my own account, and to be able to do as I liked, with nobody to scold me afterwards."

"Whom do you mean by that nobody?" he asked, with a smile.

"Well, not Grannie exactly, for I never care for her scoldings."

"Whom?"

"And not Aunt Vinnie or the rector."

"Tell me whom?" he persisted.

"Perhaps I don't want to tell you." And her chin went into the air.

"What you want is of no importance," he replied gravely. "You will have to tell me."

"But why, Dr. Cary?"

"Because I want you to."

"And I suppose what you want is of some, if not paramount, importance?" she queried, with a half smile.

"Exactly. So tell me now."

"A person does not have their own way for two months without intending to go on having it," said Alison slowly. "They acquire the taste, and it is not an epicurean one."

"The worst of having one's own way for two months, provided one is a little bit of girl——"

“Height only five foot eight and a half,” interrupted Alison.

“—Is,” continued the doctor, “that it requires a strong hand to readjust matters, and sometimes a strong hand hurts.”

“So I have heard,” she remarked indifferently.

Jim Cary bit his lips.

“I am waiting,” he said, “for your answer to my question.”

“But I am not going to tell you. You should not be so curious, Dr. Cary; it is bad manners.”

“Once upon a time,” began Jim, “there was a young lady who was put in a corner——”

“That is a silly tale!” exclaimed Alison; “and ancient history, too.”

“—And after she was allowed to come out again,” he continued, “she promised to be good and obedient in the future; or else——”

“Well, what?” asked the girl, tossing her head with the gesture Jim admired so much.

“She might have to go back there,” he added, “even though she had grown into a much grander young lady, and had been to all the parties of the season.”

“Once upon a time,” began Alison, “there was a beautiful country that had no corners, and it was bounded by a splendid big sea that had no corners either. A man lived in that country.”

“What kind of a man?” asked Jim.

“Not a very nice one, I am sorry to say. He always wanted his own way, and generally had it,

which, of course, you will see was very bad for his character. And he grew so masterful at last that there was only one thing to be done with him."

"And what was that?" There was a smile in Jim's eyes, though his face was very grave.

"To get somebody to crown him as king," replied the girl, gazing out over the fields.

"And was any one found foolish enough?" he asked quickly.

"That," said Alison, "is the rest of the story which I have not read. The moral of it is: What a dreadful thing is masterfulness!"

"But how did you get to the moral if you had not finished the story, eh, little one?"

"It was printed at the beginning, like the text to a sermon," she explained.

"And now, if we have quite finished telling tales," said Jim, "whom did you mean by that nobody?"

"Suppose I won't tell you, my dear sir?"

"I shall have to make you, that is all."

"You will grow like the man in my story if you are not careful," observed Alison, shaking her head.

"I hope I may," he answered earnestly.

"You couldn't do much to me out here, could you?" she asked thoughtfully.

"I could make you cry. That would be quite enough."

"Oh, could you?" exclaimed Alison, with fine scorn. "I should like to see you try."

And then the doctor spoke sternly—so sternly that Alison was amazed at the change in his voice, and look, and manner, and her cheeks flushed very pink at hearing herself spoken to in such a way, and she looked up half-frightened at his closing words:

“If you refuse to obey me, then, and deliberately choose to displease me, you will have to take the consequences. Stay there and make up your mind as to what you are going to do before I speak to you again.”

And he strode away down the lane towards a fallen tree on which they had often sat and rested together, leaving Alison quite alone.

The sun seemed suddenly to have disappeared, and a cold breath to be blowing across the summer warmth. The whole landscape looked different somehow, and the girl felt a sudden desolateness as she leaned her head on her folded arms, which lay on the top of the gate. She forgot the play which had prompted this little scene, and her own part in it completely. She only felt how dreary the world would be if Dr. Cary continued to be angry with her, and how she wished he would come back. Tears filled her eyes and blurred the view, and one of them fell on her sleeve. Then she turned and followed Jim to the tree.

“May I come?” she asked timidly.

“What have you to say?” he asked her, still in the same stern voice.

“It was you I meant—and I am sorry I would

not tell you before. May I come?" she repeated, looking pleadingly into his face.

"May you come?" he echoed gently, holding out his hand, and Alison let him lead her to the rustic seat which the fallen trunk made.

"I don't like you to be angry with me," she said, in a pitiful voice. "It makes the world so cold."

"Even Barnscombe?" he asked tenderly, for he noticed the glistening spot on her sleeve, and that her eyelashes were still wet.

"Yes, I think so. I had forgotten how it felt all this long time, and so I risked it again."

"Do you wish you had not, little one?"

"No, not now," and her smile came back and covered her face with sunshine. "It gives me the nicest feeling I have ever had in all my life."

"I cannot understand that," said Jim. "It seems so strange."

"Neither can I explain it. But it is when I mind that I care most, don't you see? And when you make me mind that I care most for you; it is only one of life's many paradoxes. Tell me," she added shyly after a moment's pause, "don't you like to make me cry?"

"I do. It sounds a brutal thing to say," exclaimed Jim, almost roughly, "but it is the truth."

"That is strange, too," mused Alison.

"I do not think I should," he continued thoughtfully, "unless they were tears that I could myself dry. To make you cry and be unable to

comfort you would kill me, I believe," and his voice shook.

They were both silent for a moment, and then Alison said:

"There almost was a corner in that country, wasn't there?"

"There was indeed. Poor little thing!"

"Did you want to leave me all by myself off there?"

"No, I hated doing so," he answered, with a smile. "It seemed such a waste to be alone, even for a few minutes, when I might have been with you."

"Do you know, I am beginning to understand what discipline means," said Alison, with a thoughtful look. "I always used to think it was a grand name for disagreeableness and despotism, and that we could only set our teeth and live through it. But you have shown me that it is really only another name for teaching—the hardest lessons, perhaps, but still only teaching, and the deepest, tenderest teaching, too."

"Then you have learned a great lesson from a mere nursery rhyme, so to speak. Ours was only a game after all, little one."

"Which things are an allegory," quoted Alison, "and our game has something real and true inside it, don't you think?"

"I do. It was very real at the time to me," said Jim.

"And to me," softly. "Oh, here is Aunt Vinnie! She promised she would come to meet us."

Lavinia sat down beside them, for she wanted a rest.

"We were talking about discipline," Alison explained, "and how different a thing it is to what as children we believed."

"Discipline!" echoed Lavinia; "I hardly understand. Do you mean being forbidden to do things, and punished for doing them?"

"Yes, generally speaking," replied the doctor.

"But much more, too," Alison chimed in, "being taught how to be, as well as how to do. In fact, the whole discipline of life."

"Of life?" queried Lavinia. "I thought discipline was over when we were once grown up."

"I suppose we are never quite grown-up enough for that," said Jim, with a smile. "There is always so much to learn, and we want such a lot of training."

"I never thought of that, James. But doubtless you are right."

"It seems to me," and Alison's face was very earnest, "that the secret of discipline is the person behind it, otherwise it would be cold law, and could only crush us into this or that pattern. So the secret of life's discipline is the personal love and understanding behind it, through which we are trained to be the sons of God."

The others were silent. Lavinia, because the

thought was too big for her; and Jim, because he felt unworthy to walk on holy ground.

“And life’s experiences must all have some lesson to teach,” continued the girl, “and so are something much more than just things to live through. We ought to consider the end rather than the means, but we are so stupid we hardly ever do. That is why we are so long in learning, I expect.”

“Then by the time we have learned, it will be time to die,” exclaimed Lavinia hopelessly.

“Of course it will,” replied Alison, “and not before. It is at the end of term that the holidays come.”

Lavinia looked slightly shocked. It took her breath away when Alison said such things.

“It depresses me very much,” Lavinia continued, “to think how death will put an end to everything.”

“But it won’t, Aunt Vinnie. It can’t, you know.”

“Of course I was speaking of earthly things, my dear. Doubtless there will be a new life to begin There. But novelty frightens me.”

“I do not think there will be enough newness to frighten anybody,” said Alison simply. “Mother used to tell me how the real life, which is feeling, and knowing, and loving here, cannot be broken, but will go on in just the same sweet, homely way There, only it will have greater opportunities for growing and developing.”

"But death must be an end of many good things," persisted Lavinia. "The rector says so."

"And the beginning of many much better ones," added Alison.

"I suppose it is because they have had so much more experience that our elders know so much better than we do," Lavinia observed after a short silence.

"Not necessarily," argued Alison.

"But time means experience, my dear."

"I am not so sure of that either, Aunt Vinnie. Experience is learning, and folks may grow quite old without learning much."

"I cannot follow you," and Lavinia shook her head. "And your idea seems to me hardly respectful to the aged."

Then the doctor broke in.

"Alison is right. Time is one thing and experience another. In a few months one person might learn through suffering, or loving, or losing, what another might not be taught in half a century of uneventful years. It is new to me to think these things out, but we are stupid and ignorant when we do not do so. I have lived a long while," he added sadly, "but I believe I have learned most in a time that can be measured by months."

"But, James!" exclaimed Lavinia, "surely you have not needed for many years past to learn anything more? You are so clever and good."

The doctor shook his head.

"You are very loyal, Lavinia," he said gently.

And then he looked at Alison, and saw in her truthful eyes that she thought he had yet much to learn; and he knew in a sudden flash that she alone, of all the people on this earth, could teach him those things.

"I knew you would understand," said the girl—a tender touch in her voice.

"You and James do often see things alike," Lavinia observed. "I wonder how it is?"

"Perhaps because we both have the artistic temperament," suggested Alison, with a funny little smile.

"What is the artistic temperament?" asked Jim.

"I thought it was being able to draw and paint," said Lavinia.

Alison looked at the doctor helplessly. When Lavinia entered a discussion, it usually was hopeless. Her niece once described her as a kind of person who would want to leave cards at a cathedral, and that suggested her ignorantly conventional treatment of things both great and small. To compare Alison and Lavinia was as impossible as comparing a picture with a yard of cambric.

"Tell us what the artistic temperament really is?" Jim repeated. "I have never heard it defined."

Alison looked thoughtful.

"Don't you think it is, in a way, the longing to interpret, or give expression to everything?"

"And I should say also," added Jim, "the hun-

ger for some outside beauty which shall respond to a certain inborn longing. Just as the musical person wants to hear music, the artistic temperament longs and looks out for some answer to itself."

"But perhaps there is a deeper thing than either of these," said Alison. "I should call it the passion for the best, which the second best can never satisfy."

"What do you mean by the best, my dear?" asked Lavinia, who looked terribly puzzled.

"Oh, you know! Just the best," explained the girl, whose strong point was not lucidity. "To see and strive after the best in everything, even when the second or third best would do quite as well; to want to be the best that is possible in every circumstance, above and beyond what is necessary, and just for its own sake. That is why the artistic temperament is never worldly, or greedy, or cheap."

"I cannot imagine how you can think out all these deep subjects," sighed Lavinia.

"You see," Alison went on, "a man with the artistic temperament might not make laws as well as the inartistic, but he would make love much better, because the latter involves self-interpretation."

"Do you think he would love better, too?" asked Jim.

"No; for love is something quite outside one's self, and no question of temperament any more than of tallness. But the man without the artistic temperament would tell a woman he loved her, and that would be the end of it; but the man with it would

tell her, and that would only be the beginning of it. The love itself might be equally big in both cases."

"But when a man has once told a woman that he loves her," argued Lavinia, "it is done once for all. It would be unnecessary and embarrassing for him to repeat himself."

Jim Cary made an impatient gesture.

"You can never do things once for all with the artistic temperament, Aunt Vinnie," said Alison, with a smile. "That is too mathematical a position for me to understand. Everything really is only a beginning."

"Everything that is worth caring about," corrected Jim.

"I am not sure that it is a good thing for a man to have the artistic temperament," said Alison demurely, and with a glance up at him through her long dark lashes.

"Indeed!" he exclaimed, with a half-smile.

"It does not tend to manliness, you see," continued the girl. "I have known many men whom it made effeminate, and petulant, and whimsical, and generally tiresome."

"Oh, Alison!" reproved her aunt, "what are you saying? James is none of these things."

The doctor threw back his head and laughed. His splendid physique, and the sense of his own intense manliness, made him proof against all such threats.

"I did not say he was," replied Alison inno-

cently. "I was only just thinking——" and then she stopped.

"Well, what were you thinking?" demanded Jim.

"My dear," Lavinia expostulated, "you had better say no more."

"What were you thinking?" he repeated.

"How wonderfully nice it is when a really manly man has the artistic temperament as an extra thrown in. Don't you think so?" And she appealed sweetly to him.

"You are a little witch!" he exclaimed. "Isn't she, Lavinia?"

"I hardly know, James. I have always thought of witches as such very old women."

"And you should not call me names, Dr. Cary. It is not good manners. And you know your manners are your best point," in a slightly reproachful tone.

"Still, Alison," persisted her aunt, "I think you are wrong in giving as your example a man who is in love. It is natural at your age you should know little about such things, but then it is a pity, my dear, to expose your ignorance."

The girl looked away across the view for a few moments of silence, and then she spoke with a new gentleness in her voice.

"Perhaps it was not a good example, Aunt Vinnie."

"I hardly like to speak on such a subject," continued Lavinia, a faint flush on her faded cheek.

For the Garlands belonged to that old-fashioned school which considered that the mention of love is an indecorous and almost indelicate thing rather than the ring of life's music and the rhythm of its song. "But I cannot agree with Alison that love is outside one's self. It seems to me that it is a combination of sweet and gentle attributes."

"Made up rather like a pudding?" queried the girl, tracing lines on the sandy soil with Jim's walking-stick.

"That is putting it coarsely, my dear," reproved her aunt.

"Go on, Lavinia," said Jim, in rather a strained voice, "and tell us what you really think."

"It is very kind of you, James, to be ready to listen to me."

"Oh, no, Aunt Vinnie, it isn't a bit. It is very kind of us to give Dr. Cary all these valuable pieces of information."

"My dear! Surely you jest. But I was only thinking of the attributes of love—how sweet and unselfish it is!"

"But it is not unselfish," interrupted Alison impatiently.

Lavinia lifted her hands in amazement.

"What are you saying, my dear? The person who is in love is truly unselfish, ready to give up his own way to the other without a murmur."

"But, don't you know," cried the girl, "that love is something much bigger than unselfishness? To be truly in love is to want the other person's

way, not to be ready to give up one's own for the sake of it."

"You are right there," exclaimed Jim. "The man who is in love is not a bit unselfish."

Lavinia looked pained, but Alison went on:

"The question of unselfishness in love seems to me to rob it of half its charm. If two lovers were going to spend a day or have a treat together, it would be utterly spoiled if one of them only went for the sake of the other, and not for his own individual happiness."

"Exactly," agreed Jim. "The element of self-sacrifice in its highest sense is included in love, but not that more superficial thing which is called unselfishness."

"I cannot take in your meaning," sighed Lavinia.

"Can't you see, dear," explained Alison gently, "that if Grannie wanted me to go for a walk with her when I was wanting to do something else, and I gave up my own plan to go, it would be unselfishness; but if"—and here her eyes were drawn by some magnetic force to Jim's—"the man with whom I was in love wanted me to go for a walk with him, however many other plans I might have made, I should want to go with him so much more than anything else in the world, that it could not possibly be called unselfish of me to do so."

"I don't like the discussion of these subjects," said Lavinia, a trifle peevishly; "it upsets me."

Both Jim Cary and Alison were very patient

with Lavinia just then. Perhaps because they unconsciously felt a pity for her which it would have been disloyal to even formulate into thought.

"She is growing too introspective, isn't she, Lavinia?" said Jim, boldly taking his stand on Lavinia's side. "Filling that little head of hers with all sorts of problems and puzzles. Do you hear what we are saying?" turning to the girl, who was looking up through and beyond him into some realm of distant thought.

Her eyes came back, with a smile.

"Yes, my dear sir, I hear. And when a man says 'do you hear' he always means 'Are you ready to obey?' I am not quite sure whether I am that, but let us hope yours was not an R.S.V.P. statement."

"You are right, James," and Lavinia looked quite happy again. "Alison does think too much."

"It made me worse sending me to school in London, Aunt Vinnie."

"But I thought there was no time for girls to think during a London season?" queried Jim.

"That depends on the girls," replied Alison quickly, "rather than on the time."

"I cannot imagine how an out-of-door girl like you managed in those hot, stuffy rooms," said Lavinia.

"I hated that part," answered her niece, "for you so rarely saw and felt real out-of-doors. London seems to me rather like a station—a draught at each end, and a roof of smoke. I used to look out

of my window to find a country sky and some fresh air whenever I woke in the night."

"And how often was that?" asked Jim.

"Oh, three or four times!"

"Foolish little thing! Wasting your time for rest and sleep in such a way. You shall not go to London again."

Alison bowed her head submissively. She did so enjoy that masterful way Jim had of putting a veto on things she did not want to do.

"Did I tell you, James," asked Lavinia, with a flash of sudden interest, "that Mary Jane has given notice?"

"What a bother!" said Jim absently. He was watching Alison's efforts to cover his little dog with handfuls of grass.

"It is indeed. She is such a valuable servant. Mother and I hardly know what we shall do without her. For not only is she so quick and clean in parlour work, but she is so good with her needle. And she is never long in answering the door. Have you not noticed that, James, often when you called?"

"Oh, yes!"

"And she is so respectful in her manners, too—which Mother sets great store by," continued Lavinia, whose face had become quite animated. "Of course we do not give her very high wages, but then a comfortable home and a good mistress are of such importance to a servant-girl."

There had been a time when Jim Cary had argued from his intimacy with the Garlands that the

discussion of such domestic details was an integral part of feminine conversation. That it had bored him intensely he never denied, but he had listened to the long tales with an outward courtesy which nothing could ruffle. But now his eyes were opened. Alison's talk never bored him. Why was it that Lavinia would show a lively interest in the wages of a parlour-maid, and be oppressed by such subjects as her niece had taught him to think of and discuss with so much pleasure? The question puzzled and distressed him.

"Mary Jane keeps company with a very smart young man," remarked Alison, "whose name appears to be 'Tom-i'-the-militia.' Rather a nice name, don't you think? And she never calls him anything for short. I wonder whether she, Mary Jane, will take 'Tom-i'-the-militia' for her wedded husband when the day arrives?"

"His real name is Tom Wortly," Lavinia explained. And Jim's smile suddenly faded.

On the way home Alison left them. She was always wanting to go round by the sea, and the extra distance was nothing to her young health and strength. Lavinia, looking up at Jim, saw the slight frown across his forehead and the compression of his lips.

"James," she said timidly, "I am afraid I was unsympathetic just now in the conversation we were having, but I am not accustomed to speak about such things as Alison does. I am very sorry."

"Oh, it is all right, Lavinia!" And then he

added half-sadly, "Perhaps such talk is rather dangerous."

"And I spoke crossly once, I fear. Will you forgive and forget it?" And Lavinia's eyes were full of tears.

"You are exaggerating," he said, with a kind look, "for it is a good thing to have opinions of your own."

"But not contrary ones to yours. I could not be happy in them, James. You see Alison could not really understand about love when she spoke about its not being unselfish. I would give up my own way and thoughts always to you, and I feel you give up yours to me."

"Poor Lavinia!" exclaimed Jim, and with a deeper pity than she could gauge.

"And you will not mind any more about those impatient words of mine, dear James?"

"There is nothing to mind about," and then he added quickly—"that you have said or done."

That night a great wave of trouble and perplexity swept over Jim Cary's soul. He recognised the fact that he loved Alison, though he was bound to Lavinia. Moreover, he realised that this new feeling of love was an infinitely bigger, and stronger, and more overwhelming thing than he ever imagined existed in this world at all. He was deeply read in romantic love, from the classics downwards, but he knew now that what he had read, and believed he understood—always leaving a margin for poetic fancy, at which he had smiled indulgently as

at some exaggeration—was but the alphabet of the new language which love was teaching him. A sense of awe and strange gladness uplifted him, as he came into the presence of that which was so much stronger than himself, so much deeper than his understanding, so much higher than his hopes. But close on its heels came the flood of sadness; for he felt that this great and good thing was not for him to keep. Lent by eternity for one brief moment that he might see how divine a thing is human love, then snatched away again, leaving him infinitely poorer in the possession of the commonplace, conventional affection, which he had stamped with the seal of his life's promise; yet infinitely richer, too, in the knowledge and power that come of having once looked into the Heart of Heaven, even though the vision be but for a fleeting glance.

That Alison could care for him in return never once crossed his mind, nor the possibility of her ever knowing of his love. He was a strong man, and he knew it. He could keep his secret safely locked up in his own soul, and no one should ever guess it. He could hold up his head and smile, and nobody would know that he carried about with him a mortal pain. He paced up and down his long dining-room, as was his way in any anxiety or distress, and squared his shoulders and set his teeth as a man should when he faces a blow. But his breath came fast and short, and his hands gleamed bone-white, so tightly were they clenched. Then as the struggle passed by, and the first battle of what

would be a life-long war was won, he unlocked his desk, and from an inmost drawer drew out a faded rose, the only one that Alison had ever given him. And with its dying scent came back the golden picture of a summer's day, when the girl was gathering flowers for the patients in the little cottage hospital, and he had said, "Isn't the doctor to have a button-hole, too?" And she had gathered a rose and fastened it in his coat, and then laughed at him for his vanity. How many stories lie hidden in the crumbling petals of faded flowers, how many memories come floating back on their faint scent! Sad little trophies of happy triumphs, silent expressions of "thoughts that lie too deep for tears." But while we weep over these sacred relics, and lay them tenderly on the graves of long-lost joys, the fields and woods and gardens are gay again with new flowers, which still wear the old familiar colours, and breathe the same sweet breath. And the message they bring us is, that a spring shall surely come after autumn sadness and winter death, and that we shall one day have again as many flowers as we can gather, instead of the two or three faded roses we treasure now.

Jim stood looking at the little crumpled button-hole, held so tenderly in his hand, and as he lifted it to his lips a great lump came in his throat and his eyes smarted with unshed tears.

"Good-bye, little flower," he whispered huskily; "I must not look at you again, but I shall know you are here, all the same."

CHAPTER XIII

THE WRECK

Now it happened that summer came to an end rather early that year. Like the proverbial child of Sunday-school literature it was perfectly sweet, and sunshiny, and good while it lasted, but unfortunately it died young. Rough gales blew up from the sea, and tore off the leaves before they had finished changing colour—drifting rain filled the pools with water, and the lanes with mud, and left the gardens desolate. To Lavinia it was autumn indeed, for a sadness seemed to have settled upon her that she could neither explain nor drive away. Her mother noticed she had a cold, and kept her wrapped up in a shawl by the fire; but when the cold was well again Lavinia felt no better. Alison did all she could to drive away her aunt's depression and to keep the Old House bright with the sunshine that is not only of summer. No autumn sadness had the power to quell her youthful spirits—was not there another spring coming soon, which would surely be more beautiful even than the last? For so the years mount up to our zenith of happiness, whether it come early or late. And even when we have stood

for the appointed time on our Delectable Mountain, and life calls us to walk on down the hill beyond, we still, in the memory of happiness past, hold the promise of happiness to come, and the future, shining far beyond the boundary of time, is bright with the sunshine of those long-lost joys which have been, and always will be, so dear to our hearts. But as yet Lavinia saw not this vision of hope. She had been content to live only in the present, and her powers had narrowed themselves into the small round of daily tasks. She had done her duty in the letter, but not in the spirit, of life. She had looked only on the little, till she had become too shortsighted to see the distances of faith, and hope, and love, which stretch far away into the Infinite on all sides of the sons of men. And now she felt the shadow of a coming blindness, which should shut out all her present sunshine, and leave her alone with no outlook in the future. And so Lavinia was sad. But in Alison there was perhaps more than youthful spirits which made the world just then, in spite of rain and hurricanes, so fair a place. She was climbing the Mountain and was in sight of its sun-crowned summit. She did not know this herself, any more than Lavinia knew what had happened, but she was full of a gladness she could not define, and there was joy even in battling with the elements of those wild autumn days.

“I have been out on the sand-hills,” said the girl, coming with an atmosphere of fresh air into

the small, stuffy room, where Mrs. Garland and her daughter were crouching over the fire.

"Whatever made you walk so far on such a day?" asked Lavinia in amazement.

"Oh, it was splendid! The tide was low, and the sands were so wet they looked like a smooth bit of the sea that had been left behind. A solitary cart was coming back from the lighthouse, and it might have been Noah's Ark on the face of the waters."

"My dear," interrupted her grandmother, "I do not like the introduction of Scripture illustrations into ordinary conversation. It sounds irreverent."

Alison laughed.

"I only met one person the whole day—old Benbow. He looked perfect in his jersey and great oil-skin boots and hat. He says there will be a storm to-night. I could hardly stand for the wind up on the sand-hills myself."

Lavinia shivered.

"I do wish the weather would change!" she exclaimed nervously.

"You would like it better if you came out more," said her niece. "I do wish you would, Aunt Vinnie. Your cough has quite gone, and it really is not a bit cold."

"I think the child is right," observed the old lady, looking from Lavinia's faded face to Alison's fresh cheeks. "Young people must not settle down into the ways of old ones."

"I am no longer young," said Lavinia sadly.

"Oh, what nonsense!" interrupted her niece almost roughly. She felt such a wave of pity surge up in her heart that, in a boyish way, she wanted to hide it.

"It is only too true," repeated Lavinia.

Alison knelt down beside her and put her arms round her waist.

"It isn't a bit true," she persisted, with all the vehemence that indicated she knew that it was, "and I won't have you say so, dear."

"Oh, mind my dress," exclaimed her aunt, "your clothes are so wet, and this material shows every spot."

The girl stood up and felt a sudden chill in her feelings. Why would Lavinia always think of details when big things came in sight? It was the habit of a lifetime, but Alison was young enough to think that habits are very trifling things, and can be laid aside at will directly anything larger claims one's thoughts.

"I am sorry," she said ruefully. "I hope it isn't hurt."

"You are very thoughtless, Alison," reproved her grandmother, and the girl was silent. She knew it was not thoughtlessness that had made her want to clasp her aunt in so close an embrace, and so protect her in a childish, impossible way from the cruelty of circumstances.

"I do think it is time you became a little older in your ways," continued Lavinia querulously.

"You are altogether so childish and unformed in character. I cannot understand you."

"I know you can't," a little sadly, "and perhaps you are right. I cannot understand myself. Sometimes I feel as young as Robin Merrivale, and almost as schoolboyish; and sometimes I feel, oh so much older than you, Aunt Vinnie!"

"That is absurd when you consider my years as compared with your own."

"But life is something more than years," and the girl's face grew very earnest. "Years are only part of time, but life is part of eternity."

"But our life here is made up of years," argued Lavinia. Sometimes she had a few opinions of her own when her mother was out of the room.

"In a way it is, but not really. When big things happen, don't you know how the ordinary sense of time is lost? I remember that the hour after I knew Mother had died, was longer than all the rest of my life before put together, and I could hardly remember the time when I hadn't known it."

"That was the result of excessive grief," said Lavinia.

"What did you feel like, Aunt Vinnie, when a really big thing happened to you?"

"A really big thing never has happened to me," Lavinia answered doubtfully.

"Never happened to you?" exclaimed her niece. "Don't you call falling in love a really big thing?"

"That is quite different, my dear, and not really big when compared with death."

"I should have called it bigger, for love is the only thing that death cannot destroy."

Lavinia looked puzzled.

"Of course James's proposal pleased me greatly and put me in quite a flutter, but it is so long ago now that I cannot recall my exact feelings."

"But don't you know now that life is to be found in what we feel, and are, and suffer, and not just in outside things?"

"I cannot agree with you in considering outside things unimportant. 'The trivial round, the common task, will furnish all we ought to ask,' you know, my dear. But do not let us talk of such things, it is so depressing," and Lavinia gave a little shudder.

As the day wore on, the roar of the wind and the sea waxed louder. The great rage outside as well as the misunderstanding within laid a sobering influence on Alison's young heart, and her usually merry voice was almost silent. During the evening Dr. Cary called, and he brought with him that sense of strength which is so dear to the hearts of women. He smiled at Lavinia's fear of the storm, till she felt it was foolish to have been afraid of anything while he was at hand; and he told the old lady of his day's work with so much dramatic instinct that she became quite excited over Sally Benbow's refusal to put a poultice on her small grandson at the doctor's behest.

"What did you do, James, to make her?" she asked, with much excitement.

“I did not make her,” he answered simply. “I put one on instead. The little lad will pull through now. Sally was very penitent before I left.”

The moment Jim Cary entered the room he knew that Alison was sad. His quick understanding of her—an understanding which is only learned in the school of love—read the girl’s thoughts with magic insight, and he longed to take her in his arms and comfort her, as he knew he alone could. Once or twice lately he had seen a very pathetic look in Alison’s eyes, and it made him love her all the more intensely. For he was one of those men whose strong, happy natures are especially appealed to by the touch of pity. Every little child in Barnscombe knew this in practice, if not in theory—the sick and the dying held on to him with a confidence that was never disappointed, and the helpless could not turn to him in vain. But when the girl he loved so deeply and so tenderly looked out through tear-dimmed eyes, his heart was full almost to bursting. It required all his strength of self-control, and that was no small power, to keep back the torrent of words which should tell her all she was to him. Why, oh, why had Fate been so cruel, he thought, as to bind him back with fetters which his honour would not let him break? Jim Cary forgot in his impatience that it was he himself who had riveted those bonds: because in his youth he had imagined that he was competent to plan out his own deeper life, he had made so grievous a mistake; and had thought himself satisfied with the second-best while he was yet

too blind and ignorant to see that the best awaited him, as it does all who look up for it, above and beyond the conveniences and conventionalities of life, and are content to tarry the Lord's leisure and put their trust in Him.

But Alison felt the power of his sympathy even though it was unspoken. She just sat still and listened to the trifling talk between the other three, and comfort came. He was her friend, and he would always help, and understand, and know she was not really thoughtless, and be interested in all her concerns however small. Every now and then she glanced up at him and thought how strong and big he looked, and how well his blue serge coat fitted him, and what splendidly set shoulders he had. She did so like that trick of playing with his watch-chain, and the way he put his arm over the back of the chair. She wondered whether her aunt saw all these dear, absurd, little charms of his, and then the thought of Lavinia brought back the weight in her heart and she wished that things were different, only she would not have had them different for the world.

Then came the sound of hurrying feet and many voices down from the village and along the road. Jim Cary started up to listen, and a loud rap fell on the front door.

"It's the doctor we want," cried some one, and they all ran out into the hall.

"A ship on the rocks," explained old Benbow; "and they've gone for the lifeboat. She'll be here

in half-an-hour if they bring her round by the road."

"It's no use launching her off Whatecombe," cried another voice. "Out at the point here is the nearest place to the wreck."

"Come on, come on!" shouted the people outside; and Jim seized his hat from the stand and rushed out, forgetting all about his overcoat.

"Let's go, too, Aunt Vinnie!" cried Alison excitedly. "It is fine now, and we must be there. I couldn't stay at home while all this is going on."

And Lavinia was hurried into a cloak and hat before she had time to remonstrate, and she and Alison joined the outskirts of the crowd and started on the race down to the sea.

It was a weird, impressive sight. The moon seemed tearing along across the sky through masses of jagged cloud, and the breakers broke with loud thunderclaps on the heels of the hissing back-wash. The wind screamed in the fury of its strength, and every now and then a rocket of distress ran up from the smitten ship. Would the lifeboat never come in answer to that last desperate appeal of the lost?

Jim Cary marshalled the waiting crowd into some kind of order, and the brave crew were soon picked out.

"You here!" he exclaimed in surprise, as he suddenly caught sight of Alison and her aunt. "Go back home, at once."

"Oh, no, I can't!" cried the girl. "We shall not be hurt, and I must stay."

Just then there came a shout, for the lifeboat, drawn by straining, galloping horses, was in sight.

"A man short, sir!" exclaimed one of the crew hurriedly, as they stood ready to start.

"It is all right. I am going," answered the doctor quietly, as he watched the distant procession rushing round the curve of the hill.

A sudden cry broke from Alison's lips. In the noise both of the people and the storm it was hardly audible—but Jim heard it, and it thrilled through his very soul.

"You mustn't go—you mustn't!" she pleaded, clinging to his arm. "You will be drowned, and oh, I cannot spare you!" and her pale face and streaming eyes looked up to his.

"God bless you, my darling!" he whispered, and then turned quickly away to hide the fact that his eyes, too, were blinded with tears.

A wild cheer rang out as the boat was pushed off down the beach. The men sprang in, and Jim Cary took his oar with the others; but his heart was filled with a new gladness and peace as he cast a last longing look on the dear girlish figure, which was to him the only one on that crowded shore.

"She knows now that I love her," he said to himself, "and I believe that she loves me a little. God is very good!"

And for perhaps the first time in his life a great prayer burst from Jim Cary's soul—a prayer that God would indeed bless Alison, and keep their love for each other safe, and sacred, and true; and that,

though life or death might keep them apart for a while, they should be together through eternity.

As the girl stood motionless, her eyes straining after the boat which was vanishing into the darkness, and a look of the anguish of death on her face, she felt a gentle hand take hers, and somewhere from far away came Lavinia's voice :

“ He will come back, dear. I have been praying for him, and I somehow feel he will.”

Then Alison broke down and sobbed, and it was her aunt who was suddenly the strong one, and soothed the girl's grief, and gave her hope again.

For to Lavinia, as well as to the other two, there had come the supreme moment of her life. Only a fleeting look on a face which was so dear to her, only a cry from a pair of girlish lips ; but Lavinia read the story in a flash, and understood it wholly. And with the understanding came that call which comes to every man and woman once at least before death shows them the answer to it.

Some hear it in the whisper of their mother's voice, and some in the cry of their little children. To some it sounds in the music of a life's love, and to others in the funeral march of sorrow. Lavinia heard it that night on the desolate sands—desolate to her, in spite of the crowds, for her dreams of love and happiness lay broken and buried at her feet—and hearing that call, she obeyed it ; for, as the disciples of old on the sea-shore, she knew that it was the Lord.

“ We must not stand here any longer, dear,”

she said softly, after Alison's grief had spent itself. "Let us run home and bring some brandy, and as many warm wraps as we can, to be ready when the boat comes back."

Alison looked lovingly at her aunt. She could have given her anything out of gratitude for her simple use of the word "when" in that sentence. In the girl's heart there was such a big, strong, cruel "if," but Lavinia had said the "when" so naturally that it fell like balm on Alison's troubled spirit, and she almost smiled.

"Yes, we will, we will!" she cried hurriedly; "but let us make haste." And with a pitiful attempt at bravery she added, "They won't be long now."

Not a word was spoken on their hurried journey homewards. Alison, in the selfishness of youth's sorrow, forgot everything and everybody else; and, besides, Lavinia was always so calm and quiet in her joys as well as her griefs that it seemed quite natural for her to show no other signs.

Mrs. Garland listened to their breathless story with marked disapproval.

"It is very wrong and foolish of James to risk his valuable life for a parcel of useless Frenchmen!" she exclaimed severely.

Alison waited for an instant for Lavinia to speak up in the doctor's defence, but her aunt was silent. The old fear of disagreeing with her mother kept her tongue tied even at this moment. Alison burst out, with choking voice and crimson cheeks:

"How can you speak so, Grannie? It is splen-

did of him!" And the tears rushed again into her eyes.

"You had better go to bed," continued her grandmother; "you are over-excited, I can see. And there is one good thing about the Carys—they are as much at home in a boat as I am in a rocking-chair; so perhaps James will come to no harm after all."

Then Alison ran back and kissed her before she joined Lavinia in the hall.

"Let me carry that!" exclaimed the girl, as her aunt, with some other things, took up the doctor's coat. And as Lavinia readily gave it up, a tear fell on its sleeve, which Alison mistook for a raindrop, as it glistened afterwards in the moonlight.

When they reached the shore again, great cheers were rising from the crowd.

"She's in sight," they shouted, as the lifeboat bounded over the big walls of water that the storm had built up.

"Thank God!" shrieked some excited woman, whose husband was in the boat.

"Thank God!" echoed Alison, in a whisper, with her cheek laid against the folds of the coat.

And a great cry of joy and praise went up to Heaven as the men rushed into the surf to meet the boat, and saw that not one of that brave crew was missing.

"All lives saved," rang out Jim's manly voice to tell the people the good news; but Lavinia saw his

face turn towards Alison, and a look that she had never seen before flashed between them.

“Thank God that he loved me a little first,” was her pitiful prayer, “and that I have been so happy.”

When Alison lay down to sleep that night her thoughts were in a whirl. The revelations of the evening’s experience had brought the knowledge of her own and the doctor’s love home to her; but it had not shown her Lavinia’s heart. She hoped that her aunt would never know; for, as she recalled the confused scene, she was sure that she had said nothing that the common anxiety about so great a friend would not easily explain. And Lavinia never did see things. Though Alison had sometimes felt a little impatient with her for this dulness of insight, she was very thankful for it now.

“I can live in the happiness of just knowing that he loves me,” she argued to herself; “but if Aunt Vinnie knew it would kill her. She shall never, never know. Only”—and here Alison’s eyes filled with tears—“she can never love him as I do.”

So in the Old House two women cried themselves to sleep that night.

And Jim Cary never went to sleep at all. He stayed with his ship-wrecked patients until all was well with them, and then he sat over the fire while the embers died away, and till the pale cold dawn came in through the unshuttered windows, and brought the tidings of a new day. And a new day it truly was to him—the first day of a new life. He seemed, in the wild conflicts of the evening before,

to have passed through the very depths of human feeling. He had fought with love that almost overwhelmed him as he bade Alison good-bye on the shore; he had fought with death as he struggled against the waves to rescue the vessel's drowning crew; he had fought with himself as he came back to land again, and swore that no word of disloyalty to Lavinia should pass his lips.

"And," he added to himself, as he threw open the window, and looked out over the land, still sleeping in the calm of the morning, though with a slight restless movement of birds and trees and grass which showed that waking-time was at hand, "I have fought with God all my life to have my own way, and shape my own ends. But the battle is over now. Love has claimed my soul, and I cannot stand against it. It has broken all my poor, cheap plans, and has laid me low at its feet. But I know that it is the Touch of God, and so in my defeat lies my greatest happiness."

And the peace of a new light fell on his tired soul as the sunlight crept up slowly over the hills and gilded the landscape with its smile.

CHAPTER XIV

THE ALTAR OF SACRIFICE

"How white and washed-out you both look," remarked Mrs. Garland at breakfast on the following morning. "That comes of gallivanting out after that ridiculous wreck instead of going properly to bed. Your eyes are regularly swelled up for want of sleep."

Lavinia and Alison glanced at each other with a strange, shy interest, and the latter's face was the whiter and sadder of the two.

"I shall send for James to doctor the pair of you," continued the old lady, cracking her egg. "Eating no breakfast either."

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Alison; "I know what is the matter. I have taken—a—a little cold."

"And my head aches," chimed in Lavinia. "It is only that. I want a quiet day, mother, thank you, that is all."

"I am going down to the shore," said Alison, who felt she must be alone for a time with her trouble.

"And a fine remedy for a cold that would be!" replied her grandmother derisively. "You had better go to bed with a treacle posset."

Alison shuddered.

"I dare say it isn't a cold," she said lamely. "But I feel I must get out," and she flew from the room.

"I cannot think what has come to you both," snapped Mrs. Garland; "looking more like a couple of corpses than ordinary decent females. Have some nitre and soda, Lavinia. It will do you good."

"Very well, mother," replied her daughter meekly. What did it matter to her if she did drink a little nitre and soda along with the cup of life's bitterness which she held in her trembling hand?

"And I hope to goodness there will not be another wreck, I am sure! For it has made a fine wreck of you and Alison."

"It has of me," sighed Lavinia to herself, as with tear-filled eyes she went into the china-pantry and conscientiously measured out the nitre and soda her mother had ordered.

It was strange that Lavinia felt no jealousy of Alison; but this was perhaps because she had never known what real love was. The revelation of yesterday distressed her more deeply by the change than the loss it involved. It had been the habit of her life for many years to be engaged to Jim, and the thought of breaking that order of things frightened even more than saddened her. And Lavinia also was guided by a childlike faith which whispered that the Lord gave and the Lord had taken away, and so, though she could not rise to the

heights of adding, "blessed be the name of the Lord," she accepted with a gentle grief the Divine decree, and never dreamed of rebelling or fighting against it.

As Lavinia sat silent over her sewing that day a very tumult of thoughts and plans surged through her poor aching head. What she should do, and how she should do it, was a problem beyond her capacity easily to solve. She had a hope that Dr. Cary might say or do something; but at the bottom of her heart she knew that it was a false one, for Jim would never break a promise, or do what the world calls a dishonourable thing. So for once in her life Lavinia felt she was called upon to think and act for herself. And Alison's mind was also in a tumult, though of misery rather than of perplexity, as she wandered alone down among the flat, slippery rocks which the receding tide uncovered. The restless tossing of the sea left in the wake of the storm, and the wailing wind which seemed almost spent by the night's fury, filled her with the sympathy of Nature's touch. Her eyes were blinded with tears, and big sobs caught in her throat as she realised what she had both gained and lost. She loved Jim Cary with no mere girlish fancy, but with a woman's heart; and she knew that he loved her with the one big love of his life. Yet between them was a barrier which could not be broken. She thought too well of the doctor to want him to jilt Lavinia; but the anguish of her heart lay in the knowledge that her aunt did not really care for her

lover in the deep, true way that is only worthy of the name of love. And so the inevitable sacrifice of the joy of two lives would only be to Lavinia a conventional satisfaction.

“So many little things can make her happy,” sobbed the girl, in her lonely sorrow; “but there is only one possible happiness for him and me. Oh, why—why are circumstances so cruel?” And exceedingly bitter was her cry.

In the afternoon Jim Cary called at the Old House, and to Mrs. Garland’s disapproval of wrecks in general—and this one in particular—was added a fresh incentive as she noticed that the doctor was more changed by the night’s experience than either Alison or her aunt. There was a set, strained look on his face, and an unnatural sound in his voice, that the old lady could not make out, but for which, with all her courage, she dared not call the doctor to account.

“A pretty night’s work of it you all seem to have had,” she remarked in an injured voice.

“I am afraid you are over-tired,” he said, turning to Lavinia, and speaking with a gentleness which she had never heard before.

The tears started to her eyes.

“Oh, no!” she exclaimed quickly. “Or, perhaps, just a little. I am not accustomed to being out so late, and in such excitement.”

“And you were not very well to start with,” he added kindly. “Can I do anything for you, Lavinia?”

“No, thank you, James. I shall be better to-morrow.”

And Jim felt a great rush of pity for poor, faded Lavinia. Of pity, that she would never know of that great thing which he had only discovered such a little while ago, and without which he had been quite happy for so many years; but, having now known it, he could never be happy away from it again. And he longed to make up to her by his untiring care for this immeasurable loss, and to lead her gently and safely as some blind person, along life's way, with kindly indulgences and tender little treats, because she could not see the glorious view around. So Jim became suddenly much more affectionate in his manner to Lavinia than of old; but she saw the pain which shadowed his eyes and stencilled deep lines on his face, and, knowing whence it came, a great pity filled her heart also.

“And now you have all sacrificed your lives, and health, and goodness knows what, after those rubbishy Frenchmen,” said Mrs. Garland snappishly, “I suppose they don't know enough English to say a decent thank you?”

The doctor smiled, a white, set smile that had no amusement beneath it.

“Thank-yous are out of the question under some conditions—but they are grateful enough, poor chaps! though we only did our duty, and there will always be enough Englishmen to do that without a thought of thanks. It was a fine sight to see some of those sailors take their places so

readily with wives and little children waiting at home."

"No finer for them than for you, James," observed the old lady, "for a man's life is dearer to himself than any one else's can be."

"Not always, Mrs. Garland."

And Jim thought how easy last night it would have been to die for Alison. Far harder was it to live on without her.

"It seems to me," continued Mrs. Garland, "that you will all be the better for a night's rest. There is Alison, with a face like a sheet, gone off to the shore on a wild-goose chase for fresh air, or some such nonsense. She will be laid up next. I wish you would go after her, James, and bring her in. She confessed to a little cold, too, this morning."

"I am rather busy——" began the doctor; but the old lady interrupted him.

"That is all rubbish! And, besides, you will have plenty of time to go while the tea is brewing."

"Will you come with me?" asked Jim, turning to Lavinia. "The walk might do you good."

"Oh, no!" she cried, with an involuntary shrinking, "I am not strong enough to-day. I will—I will come with you to-morrow, James, if you will let me."

The doctor looked surprised, for Lavinia sounded hysterical. But it did not matter. Nothing would ever matter again, yet life must go on, and as familiarly as possible in spite of the strange unfamiliarity of this oppressive grief. And Jim was

strong to deal with it—not in the old strength that could grasp and hold a situation and turn it to his own will, but in the new strength that comes to those who can suffer in silence, and carry a burden it is their duty to bear.

So when, as he walked seawards, he caught sight of Alison down by the water's edge, and thought of how her presence had brightened and filled every place for him, and made his much-loved home country so infinitely dearer still, his eyes clouded with tears, and he bowed his head in a silent appeal for help—a help that is more needed even for the dreary days of aching loneliness than for the crises of heroic sacrifice or sudden death.

And Alison saw him in the distance, and turned with dragging steps to meet him. She had no more tears left to cry with, and the pitifulness of her wan smile was sadder than her deepest sobs.

“Is Grannie wanting me?” she asked simply. “I ought to have gone home before. But—but it was—nice down here.”

“She sent me to fetch you,” he said quietly. “She was afraid you would take cold.”

“Oh, no! I am all right,” and her voice shook a little; but Jim took no notice, and looked straight ahead.

“Try to have a good night's rest,” he advised her.

“Yes, I will. It was such a strain yesterday, and we—we got rather over-excited,” and she laughed a thin, faint little laugh.

"I know, I know."

"But it will soon be all right again, won't it?" she pleaded pathetically, "and like it used to be?"

"Oh, yes! We shall all be better to-morrow, and perhaps the sun will shine."

"I wish it would!" and a little sob caught her breath.

"And you will soon be well and—and bright and happy again, won't you?" And his face looked drawn and withered with his pain.

"Of course," she answered, with a brave attempt to speak cheerfully. "And you will, too."

"Yes, yes! We will have some more nice walks and talks when—when this depressing weather is over."

"That will be nice. And things will be ordinary again, won't they?"

"We will make them so," and she felt a faint comfort in the strength of his voice.

So they went on making pitiful little plans, which they both knew must come to nothing, and trying to comfort each other with a comfort that neither had the power to bestow.

"You see the wreck, and all that, was very upsetting to the nerves," said Alison, when a pause became dangerous.

"But you don't feel ill, do you?" he asked anxiously.

"Oh! no; quite well. Only tired, and—and wanting a rest."

"I can't come in again," he said, as they walked

up the lane. "Will you explain to them that I was obliged to go back to my work?"

"And—you won't look so fagged to-morrow, will you, Dr. Cary?" she begged him. And then, with a half-cry, she added, "Promise me you won't."

"I shall be all right, little one," and the tenderness crept back into his voice, "if you will, too. And promise me that—that you will be impertinent again soon," and he strode away before she had time to answer, lest she should see the quivering of his lips.

When Alison went indoors, and took her accustomed place with that unaccustomed look of sorrow on her sweet face, Lavinia's heart was full. She was very fond of her niece, and there was a stricken look about the girl that would have melted a harder heart than Lavinia's.

"You are sickening for some complaint, in my opinion," observed Mrs. Garland to her granddaughter cheerfully.

"We shall know in a fortnight," replied Alison, with a weak attempt at a laugh. "But you need not worry, Grannie, I am only overdone."

"Overdone, indeed! And what with, I should like to know?" The old lady was distressed by the present inexplicably troubled state of affairs, and she showed her distress by general displeasure. "The young people are different now to what they were in my girlhood. Overdoing, and nerves, and such-like rubbish! I do not know what this generation is coming to!"

"I think, Mother dear, if you will kindly excuse me," said Lavinia meekly, "I will go to bed early to-night. I need the rest."

"The best you could do, in my opinion. And take another dose of nitre and soda, Lavinia. It will do you good."

So Lavinia went to bed, but not to rest. She rehearsed over and over again what she should say to Jim on the morrow; and by and by, with the first gleams of dawn, came a peace upon her tired spirit. And a faint joy sprang up in her heart at the sight of the new day, for she knew that to her it was given to wipe out this trouble from two dear lives and she had made up her mind to do it, cost what it might, before that day was dead.

Alison was braver and brighter that morning. She, too, had passed a night of prayers and tears, and rose strengthened to go on her way.

"Will you stay with Mother this afternoon, Alison?" Lavinia asked her as they left the dinner-table. "I am going out for a walk with James."

And Alison readily assented.

The doctor smiled as Lavinia met him in the lane. He looked worn and ill, but his voice rang kindly as he said how glad he was to see her.

"I believe this is the first walk you have ever planned for yourself, Lavinia."

"Perhaps it is, James. But I want a talk with you to-day."

"Is anything the matter with the hens? Or is

there mutiny in the Sunday-school?" he asked, half-amused.

"Neither," Lavinia took the trouble to explain. "It is of ourselves that I wish to speak, James."

Then the doctor looked serious.

"Lavinia," he said earnestly. "Do you remember that evening so many years ago, when I wanted you to fix our wedding-day, and you made me promise never to broach that subject again until you gave me leave? Well, I want to say now, before you speak, that on any day which you may now fix I shall be ready to make you my wife."

Lavinia's eyes filled with tears at the generosity of his words.

"It may be that I have wronged you," he went on, "in being content to wait so long. But I wanted to please you, and do the best for you that I could. And if it was a mistake, forgive me, Lavinia."

She laid a trembling hand on his arm.

"I want to thank you, James, for all your goodness to me—indeed I have nothing to forgive; you have been far too kind. But I want to tell you also that I have been thinking over matters, and—and—I am not fitted for any other life than this, nor should I be happy now in it. So, James, I feel the time has come for our engagement to be at an end."

"At an end!" exclaimed the doctor, aghast. "I do not understand you. What do you mean?"

"You must not be vexed, James," and Lavinia panted at this daring deception on her part, "but I know that what I am saying is for the best. I shall

never leave my mother, and I would rather know that I am not bound by any engagement. I shall be happier free—indeed I shall.” And that was the first lie Lavinia had told in her life.

“Have you ceased to care for me, Lavinia?”

“Not as a dear friend, James. But I do not think I care in that other way—not as a wife should. And it must not break our—our friendship,” and Lavinia’s voice shook.

“Nothing can do that,” cried Jim, his brain in a whirl. “But are you sure, Lavinia? Sure that your decision is for your own happiness above everything?”

“I am, dear James.” And so Lavinia told her second lie.

“I do not know what to say to you, or whether to let you have your own way after all,” and he smiled slightly, for Jim Cary had ruled so long that it never struck him that he might one day have to obey. And this happened to be the day.

Lavinia drew herself up with a new dignity—the dignity of a true self-sacrifice—and she said quite quietly, but very decidedly:

“I must be the judge of this matter, James, seeing that I am the person involved. And I now tell you once and for all that our engagement is at an end, though I trust our friendship will be a life-long one.”

He clasped her hand in silence.

“You must not be angry with me, James.” Lavinia could not command for long. “It is for the

best, I know, and you will agree with me—soon, I hope.”

Then he stooped down and kissed her pale brow.

“You are sure you are doing what is best for yourself?” he repeated anxiously.

“Quite sure, James.” And perhaps Lavinia was right, though the truth was as yet hid from her eyes.

“I will let them know at home,” she added after a few moments’ silence, “and explain that it is entirely my own doing.”

“If you will have it so,” he answered slowly.

“That subject is now closed for ever, James.”

And the doctor accepted her decree.

When Lavinia reached home again with an unusual spot of colour on her cheeks, she found Alison reading aloud to Mrs. Garland.

“You look feverish, Lavinia,” exclaimed the old lady. “It is my opinion that both you and Alison contracted some disease that night in the crowd, and in your case it is developing first.”

“The wind has caught my face, mother. It is rather cold to-day.”

“You and Alison might have changed places, to look at the colour of your face and the whiteness of hers.”

And Lavinia smiled as she saw the hidden truth that lurked in those unconscious words. She and Alison had changed places indeed. Her niece sat on a footstool beside the fireplace, and she held out her hand to Lavinia.

"I am so glad you have had a nice walk, Aunt Vinnie, and feel freshened up."

"Yes, dear, thank you."

And Lavinia felt a thrill of triumph in the thought that it was she, and she alone, who was going to make Alison bright and happy again. The girl's face looked so pinched and wan, and there was such a world of misery in her big, dark eyes, though her lips smiled bravely and she tried to talk naturally to her grandmother and aunt.

There is almost a pleasure in lingering over a grief which we are just about to cure—no anguish in seeing tears that we know we can dry. We stop for a moment before we speak the healing word, and so heighten the joy of the relief we bring. Perhaps it is this feeling that, in the Light of Another World, takes all the bitterness from the hearts of those who love us and yet watch our grief. They see how short is the night of weeping, how near and bright and perfect the morning's joy; and so, with tender pity for the passing woe, they can still be glad because the time of healing is so close at hand.

The feeling of power was a new one to Lavinia—and there was an exhilaration in having acted on her own account for once, which almost made her merry as she dispensed the tea.

Alison wondered at the change, but thought that of course it was Jim who had, in some way, come to the rescue, and made Lavinia happy again. Wherein she was most utterly mistaken.

After she had gone upstairs to bed that evening

her aunt braced herself to break the news to Mrs. Garland, and to Lavinia this was the hardest task of all.

"Mother," she began timidly, her poor lips parched and shrivelled with terror, "I have something to tell you which, I fear, may disturb you, and of which I am afraid you will disapprove. But—but—it had to be so—indeed it had!"

The old lady looked up sharply.

"Well, out with it! Do not let us have any beating about the bush."

Lavinia's breath came in choking gasps, and she trembled so that she could hardly speak. She felt just as she used to when her mother bade her speak out in the old days and when the speaking involved a severe punishment, which was agony to the sensitive child.

"I have broken off my engagement," she whispered hoarsely. "Oh, Mother! Do not be angry with me. I cannot bear it—now."

Mrs. Garland dropped her knitting in amazement.

"Goodness gracious!" she exclaimed. "And what ever for?"

"I could not leave you, and my dear home here," explained Lavinia hurriedly. "And it was not fair to go on like this, unless I intended to get married some day; and oh, Mother! I could not change everything now and begin a new life. I am so much happier with you—and—and—I think James will be happier, too."

"Why did you not consult me?" asked her mother severely.

"I don't know," said Lavinia faintly. "But you will forgive me, Mother, will you not?"

Mrs. Garland sat in silent meditation for a few minutes, and then she spoke:

"Well, since you did not consult me, there is no more to be said about that, but if you had, I am of opinion that I should have agreed with your course of action, Lavinia."

It was her daughter's turn now to be surprised. That her mother should approve of her was beyond her wildest flights of imagination.

"You see, my dear," continued the old lady, "you are not so young as you were ten years ago, and you have settled down, especially since Alison came, into quite the maiden aunt."

"Yes, I know, Mother."

"And a man cannot stand old-maidish ways, Lavinia. Their tempers are bad enough when they have married angels; but if they are tried a bit extra in any way, why, Heaven help their wives!"

"James has always been very patient with me."

"I wish you would not interrupt me, Lavinia, when I am just talking the matter over. That is another of your tiresome ways. Why, many a husband would strike you for that."

Lavinia bent her head to the storm, which was not, by some miracle, actually breaking upon her action, but yet was flashing and muttering all round.

“And I really could not have spared you during my lifetime, and that may be as long as yours—longer I often think, now you have grown so pinched and peaky. Your father was not a long liver either, you see, and you have always taken after him amazingly. Then, my dear, there is no denying it—marriage is a very upsetting thing, especially with a masterful man like James. You never have another bit of peace until the Lord has seen fit to take them, and that is a trying outlook for such a poor-spirited, delicate thing as you are. In my opinion he would outlive you by many years.”

Lavinia took her mother's hand in her thin cold fingers, and pressed it gently in gratitude.

“And you see your habits are all formed now, Lavinia, and you cannot be changed in your ways all in a minute. In fact, never at your age. And woe to the woman who cannot be changed to fit into every fad and fangle of the man she has married, if he happens to be of the sort who have wills of their own! For my part I chose one without, and so was blessed accordingly.”

Lavinia nodded.

“So, though I think it was a strange oversight on your part not to consult your mother, and one for which Providence might have seen fit to punish you for the rest of your life, still through a very merciful interposition you seem to have been guided rightly, Lavinia, even without my advice, and I do think it is best as it now is.”

"Oh, Mother! you have removed such a load from my heart," cried Lavinia, kneeling at her mother's side, "for without your approval I could never be happy."

"Of course not, my dear."

But the old lady graciously patted her head, as a sign of marked approbation. It had never occurred to Mrs. Garland in her life to kiss any one between meals, so to speak.

"Alison, dear, may I come into your room?" asked Lavinia, knocking at the girl's door on her way up to bed. "I want to tell you something."

Alison's heart turned sick and cold. Surely it must be of her long-delayed wedding that Lavinia wished to speak, and she felt that this would be too hard to bear just yet. So the bitterness of her grief swept over her as some overwhelming wave, and threatened to drown her girlhood in its depths.

"I want to tell you, dear," continued her aunt, "that James and I are no longer engaged. I broke it off myself this afternoon."

"What!" cried Alison, "I do not understand!"

"You see, my dear, that I am getting older, and my life runs very smoothly in this home groove, and I felt that I could not ever change it now for a new home and new duties. And so it seemed wrong to continue an engagement which was only one in word, and not in deed or truth, and I told James so to-day."

"And what did he say?" gasped Alison.

"He was very good to me," and Lavinia's lips

trembled, "but he had no choice in the matter, my dear. I decided it."

Alison was amazed. There was a quiet strength in her aunt's voice which had never been there before, for it was only during the last two days that Lavinia had at last grown up.

"I have been explaining it to Mother," her aunt went on, "and that has rather upset me, for I feared she might be vexed at my acting for myself in a matter of such importance." Lavinia did not see that it was just because the matter was of such importance that she ought to have acted for herself. "But she was very kind, and said that perhaps I was getting too old-maidish to think of marrying any one. And I know she could not spare me either. Indeed she says so."

It did not strike Lavinia that her mother at the far end of life had no right to claim all that might have come to brighten her lot at life's beginning, or at any rate before she had gone half-way.

Alison knelt down by her aunt, and clasped the slender figure close in her strong young arms.

"I hope it will be for your happiness," she said softly, "for you deserve to be happy, dear; you are so good."

"Oh, no!" demurred Lavinia; and then she went on dreamily: "One gets so into the way of drifting, that one loses sight of how far one has come. And you see, Alison dear, on that night of the wreck we all entered, as it were, into the courtyard of death, and we stood waiting and wondering

whether any would receive the call. And things look different when we are as near to the Unseen as that, and a truer light seems to shine, and we know more about ourselves and other people."

"Yes, I know," whispered Alison, and her eyes were wet with tears.

"So it was then I saw my—my mistake; and it is not too late for me to put matters straight, I hope. My life has been a very peaceful, happy one," and Alison's tears fell at the pathos of that past tense, "and I—I want other people to be happy, too."

Then Lavinia broke down, and the two women sobbed together, still holding each other fast.

"How foolish I am," cried Lavinia, after a little while, "for it seems as if I were unhappy, and, indeed, I am not. I feel a new happiness, somehow, that is more active than the old passive happiness, and there is nothing to cry about at all."

"Are you sure there is not?" asked Alison wistfully.

"Yes, my dear. And, listen, I want you to understand once for all that it is because I feel it will be for my own happiness and welfare in the end, and because the duties and responsibilities involved would be too much for me, that I have brought my engagement to an end. I told James so this afternoon."

And, being a man, Jim had accepted the statement simply, and believed it on Lavinia's word: being a woman, Alison, with more subtle insight, saw

through the spoken word, and understood. But she accepted the statement all the same, and, with a heart full of tenderness, kissed the thin, white hands that thought they had so safely and successfully hidden Lavinia's secret sacrifice.

CHAPTER XV

CONCLUSION

GRADUALLY things slipped back on to the old familiar lines again, but it was very gradually, and there was a difference underneath of which Jim Cary and Alison could not be unconscious. To Lavinia, when the storm and struggle were once over, the change was hardly perceptible. She settled down so quickly and readily into the friendship stage with the doctor; and, indeed, it was only in name that their relationship for a long while had been otherwise. Moreover she had, by that one act of heroic self-sacrifice, raised herself on to a higher plane of life, where the light was brighter, and the view a little wider, and the atmosphere fresher and more bracing. The daily round of small interests she felt she could now freely enjoy, with no cloud of heavier responsibilities threatening to hide them from her loving eyes. The home groove in which she was so happy, had now no barrier which need turn her steps elsewhere. She was at rest and at peace—a rest and peace which come to every one who bows in reverent obedience to Divine Authority, and believes, in spite of all contrary

inclinations and appearances, that God knows best.

But to the other two Lavinia's action had altered the whole of life's outlook. In a short time the slight stiffness and constraint in Jim's manner wore away, and then Alison began to laugh and play again; and her boyish ways, that had been so completely laid aside, came back, and brought with them the old dashes of defiance and impertinence and merri-ness which Jim loved so well, and feared were lost for ever. Though he longed to tell her of his love, now that he was a free man—and he had always been an impatient one—there was something about Alison that sealed his lips and kept matters back all through the winter days. At times he feared whether after all he had been mistaken on the night of the wreck, and seen only the anxiety of a friend on Alison's face instead of the anguish of a lover. And through thinking so much of it he blurred it into confusion, and knew not whether the girl cared for him or no. And she was waiting for the healing touch of time on Lavinia's secret wound, of which Jim had no knowledge; and she shrank from exposing her aunt to the sometimes carelessly rough contact with another's joy, until she felt its power of hurting would be diminished. So spring came round again to Barnscombe, with all its wealth of beauty and blossom, and the promise of a new life in the stirring woods, and opening flowers, and singing birds. And the sea forgot the wailing of the winter storms and smiled in the face of spring, and

caught the sunbeams in its arms and rocked them there to sleep. The tall white hemlock ran up in graceful wreaths to meet the snowy May-blossom of the hedges, and so lined all the lanes with white. The buttercups came back to gild the meadow-land, and the wild hyacinths lay in a haze of blue along the woods. Truly there never was so fair a spring before, even in the fair west country, thought Alison in wondering delight as she roamed through fields and lanes, by hillside, and across the sandy burrows in the hollows of which grew the rarest wild flowers of the land. And she was right; for to her there never had been, nor ever would be, another spring quite so perfect and so fair.

We most of us know one such spring, and the memory of it, whether it be hidden in a fuller happiness or an aching sadness, will always be among our dearest treasures, until we find it again laid up for us in Heaven. And Jim felt that the long stretch of years behind him was but a short waiting-time for such brightness and beauty as this. He had never known, before Alison came into it, that life could be so blessed a thing; even though he had enjoyed in a healthy, manly way, all that was good in it, and had been utterly free from the morbid introspection and racking nerve tension which sap so much of man's strength in these modern days. With him the danger had lain in entirely the opposite direction. To be content because he felt things too little; to be happy with the second-best in ignorance that there was a best to find; to feel that

his circumstances were in his own hands, and that he could always succeed where he would; to glory in his own strength, as that of a master, instead of rejoicing in it as a power to serve. But when the touch of a true love made him suddenly halt, all this was changed. The simple self-confidence which marks the man who has always had success within his reach forsook him, and left him diffident and doubtful; the easy assurance which is second nature to a man who is personally attractive, and who has always had a good position socially, melted in the consciousness that he was growing old and possibly past his prime, while the girl he loved had hardly reached hers as yet; the careless freedom from all pecuniary responsibility which is the heritage of those who need not work for their living became changed into a regret that he had so little to offer a wife; and, most of all, the comfortable feeling that he had always done his duty, and held his head high in the sight of the world, gave place to a longing to grow worthier of such a gift as love, and to learn from the humblest beginning all the stores of knowledge, of hope, and of faith, to which love itself is the key.

It was on an early day in that matchless May time that Jim Cary and Alison walked through the very woods in which George Lumsden had painted Petronel so many years ago. The doctor glanced with admiration at the girl's tall, graceful form, and thought how wonderful it was that he had been kept just standing still, while she outgrew the pina-

fores and sun-bonnets which in those days she must have worn. Her laughing face and merry ways filled him with a half-dread lest his hope after all was a false one, and her affection for him only that of the child which was so integral a part of her character.

"How dull you are to-day," she was saying. "A penny for your thoughts, sir."

"I was thinking what a lovely day it is."

"For shame! To talk about the weather may be a social necessity, but to think about it is shocking. I could not possibly give you a penny for that."

"But that was only the beginning of my thoughts," he explained, "as it is never anything but the beginning of a conversation. You must not be so impatient."

"The afternoon is young as yet," she replied resignedly, "and I am all attention, sir."

"I was thinking," he said slowly, "about that bow of ribbon in your hat. It is so different from any I have ever seen before."

"Woollands sold many hundreds exactly like it last year," observed Alison demurely.

"Oh, no, they did not!" exclaimed Jim. "I am afraid you are a bit stupid to-day. There never was another sailor hat quite like yours, and you ought to know such a simple little thing without my having to tell you."

"I like hats trimmed with association," said Alison. "Doesn't that sound like football colours?"

Jim smiled.

"There is a lot of trimming on that hat of yours, though an outsider would think it was only a band of ribbon."

"I am always happy in a sailor hat, somehow," the girl went on. "It is funny how one is so much happier in some clothes than others. Dresses seem to be lucky sometimes, and if they begin so, they generally keep so. I always behaved well but felt sad in my bridesmaid's frock."

"You do not always behave well in a sailor hat, you know."

"Yes, I do. At least nearly always. Only you are so strict, it makes me behave badly sometimes."

"It ought to have an opposite effect," observed Jim.

"Oh, no! because," and Alison's eyes twinkled, "when I know a thing is stronger than I am I want to fight with it, just to see. And you are always stronger than I am, you know. I am glad of that!"

"Why, little one?"

"I should despise a man whom I could master," she replied, with her chin in the air.

"I know that. If I had not, perhaps I might not always have been quite so strict."

"That was very clever of you!" exclaimed Alison admiringly. "But it isn't much of an effort to you to be masterful, is it, Dr. Cary?"

"Take care what you are saying," he replied warningly. "But perhaps it is a greater effort than you think—with you. I want with one side of me to

spoil you all the time, but with the other I would not do so for the world."

"Which is the side that wants to spoil me?" asked the girl. "I should not mind meeting it sometimes."

"The outside. It is my instinct to be indulgent outside, but," and his voice grew grave, "inside it is not."

"I like that," said Alison quickly, "it appeals to me."

"I am glad of that, for I could not alter it if it did not."

"Do you know," and Alison's face looked thoughtful, "I believe you are cleverer in scolding than in anything else. It seems to me sometimes to amount to genius."

Jim laughed.

"Don't jeer," reproved Alison; "but you are, really. Generally when people scold other people, the latter are furious, and make up their minds that if they have a single virtue it is illustrated by that particular course of action, and that of all the disagreeable, nasty, unkind, horrid creatures in the world the scolders are the worst."

"And where does my genius come in?"

"Why, you make people feel frightfully sorry they have done things, and resolve never to do them again, and think how much nicer you are than they ever imagined before."

"Do I make you feel all that?" And Jim smiled down on her very tenderly.

“Oh, yes! I am frightfully sorry, and I resolve never to do the thing again.”

“Do you?” interrupted Jim. “I am surprised to hear that, I must confess.”

“Of course I do! Only, resolves are rather like gauze frocks—they cannot help not wearing very well.”

“And what else does it make you think?”

“Well, afterwards, that you are—nicer than I imagined. But then I always imagine that you are perfectly horrid—just before. And I am not other people, you know, even though I may agree with them sometimes.”

“Yes, you are. You are all the other people in the world to me.”

Alison laughed nervously.

“I have heard of people being a host in themselves.” Then, with a hurried change of subject, she exclaimed: “Don’t you like it when the sun goes behind little clouds like this, and great shadows come racing across the country as if a huge bird were flying overhead? I say,” she continued, looking up at him half-shyly, “isn’t it funny how the sun gets mislaid sometimes, and cannot be found anywhere?”

“When does that happen, little one?”

“Oh, sometimes! Perhaps you do not know, because it is generally—when you are away.”

“Yes, I do know; but I always thought that it was you who had hidden it.”

“Please, sir, ’twasn’t me, sir,” said Alison, with

a little laugh. "And you should not lay the blame of things you do on other people. It is very mean!"

"What a child you are!" he exclaimed, with a smile.

"That is the worst of it," said Alison, suddenly sobered. "One bit of me never will grow up. I feel such a woman sometimes, and such a boy at other times; and it is impossible to reconcile the two, though they are both me. I am a kind of patchwork, and that is what makes me so horribly incongruous."

"I will not allow you to use such a word as 'horribly' in connection with yourself," he interrupted sternly.

"Why not?"

"Because I forbid it. So now you know."

"And people do not understand incongruities," the girl went on, "and I cannot explain them myself."

"I understand all yours," he answered gently.

"Yes, I know," and her clear brown eyes looked up straight into his. "You always understand me in every mood, and make things always all right."

"Do you really mean that?"

"You know I do. What makes you so understanding about everything?"

"Not about everything, I am afraid," and his voice rang in a minor key. "I am only at the very beginning of some understanding, groping my way through the alphabet, so to speak."

"Tell me," she begged, and drew a little nearer.

Jim Cary looked away into some distance where perhaps no other eyes could follow him.

"All my life," he said slowly, "I have only really believed in that which I could prove. But I have found out now that there is a much stronger, and dearer, and more vivid life which cannot ever be proved, and in which all the realities can only be seen by faith. So I know how poor and bald a thing is proof for man to live by, when faith and hope and love are within his reach."

"It is like preferring an addition sum to a great picture, isn't it? But lots of people do."

"That is because they do not understand," said Jim earnestly. "I know, for I have come that way myself. They take a crude, old-fashioned bit of conventional teaching and call it religion. And of course it has no hold on their hearts and lives."

"Just as they might read the love stories in 'Queechy' and 'The Wide, Wide World,' and then think they know all about love," added Alison.

"You have to be in love yourself before you can know what it is." And Jim looked as if he knew.

"And in the same way, you have to be touched by a Greater than oneself before you can know what religion is."

"You would call it an intuition, as both love and genius are?" he asked thoughtfully—"something outside ourselves?"

"Some One outside ourselves," she answered softly, "at whose touch genius flashes through the

brain, and love through the heart, and what men call religion through the soul."

"It is difficult to explain this to people who are outside," said Jim, "and to make them understand."

"It would be difficult to explain what love is to Robin Merrivale," argued Alison, "and impossible to make him understand—yet. But that does not mean that there is no such thing." And she smiled slightly.

"Yet if that youngster were to demand a proof, the man who is in love could not give him one. I never thought of that before."

"It seems to me," said the girl, "that proof is only just at the very beginning of things. A mental course of straight strokes and pothooks, but fearfully crude and poor compared with all that comes after."

"And I have spent all these years in that copy-book stage," exclaimed Jim sadly, "and learned nothing else till just lately."

"But there is lots of time," she interrupted gently.

"There is not enough time, I am afraid," he replied gravely; "but there will be enough of eternity, I think."

Then they sat silent for a while on the old trunk of the felled tree, towards which their walks so often tended, and at last Jim spoke.

"I am going to tell you a story," he said gravely.

"A nice one?" queried Alison, who felt an uncomfortable lump in her throat.

"You can be the judge of that when you have heard it. It is rather a sad story, perhaps."

"Then do not tell it me," she begged, laying a pleading hand on his coat sleeve. "It is too sunny a day for a sad story."

"I must tell it you, little one," and there was a great tenderness in his voice.

Her face paled, and a look of trouble dawned in her eyes, and deepened them, but she answered nothing.

"Once upon a time," he began, and he looked straight ahead as he spoke, "there was a garden wherein grew many sweet flowers, and where the uncultivated bits were as full of wild beauty, and as fair to look upon, even as the rest. And the sun shone on the garden, and sometimes the gentle rain-drops fell, and it grew more perfect every day, whether through shadow or sunshine. And the birds sang there more sweetly than anywhere else, and the colouring of the flowers was more perfect. One day a man passed by that way—a man who had no garden of his own, but lived out on the bleak moor where there were no flowers for him to gather, and no twittering of birds for him to hear. And he stopped to look in admiration on the beauty of the garden; and then, as there was no one by to prevent him, he walked inside, and found its depths and wilds and hollows even fairer than the ways he had already seen. Still there was no one to molest him,

and he began to long to work in that garden, and plant his favourite flowers amid the tangled beauty of the underwood, and make little paths for himself where he could wander and rest away from all the outside world. Once or twice he saw a stranger enter and walk across the garden, and with a fierce fury he longed to drive him out, as an intruder, from the sweet places which in his own mind he loved to call his own. But his anger was stayed by the knowledge that he had no right there himself, and the time might come when he, too, should be banished from the garden that he loved. And the longing grew upon him to devote his whole life to that garden, and make it his very own. But then," and here Jim's voice failed a little, "he remembered that his whole life was no longer his. Much of it had already run its course, and perhaps the arm that was so strong now to work would grow too feeble, and the vigour which he could now spend would gradually fade, and so his garden be neglected. And—and the man paused; for truly he loved his garden better than himself, and would give, or, harder still, give up anything to keep it sunny and bright. Perhaps it might be that a younger man would be a better gardener, though he could never care for the garden more. So the man stood still one day, and looked all round with longing eyes and—and a sad heart. For outside the garden lay the gray wilderness, bleaker and colder than ever before. Then he stooped down and laid his hand upon a bunch of forget-me-nots which he himself

had planted there, and he whispered, ' Little Garden, if I go away, and another worthier gardener comes, don't let him throw away these flowers of ours, but keep them, for my sake, growing in the garden I shall never cease to love.' "

Alison saw that Jim's eyes were wet with tears, and her own lips quivered as she drew near to him.

" And then," he continued, with an effort, " the man——"

" Stop!" she cried, in a choking voice, " I know the rest better than you do. Listen: the man was going away, but he could not after all, because——"

" Because what?" Jim interrupted quickly, and his face was very white.

" Because," said Alison, looking up at him through tear-filled eyes, and burying her hand in his big, strong grasp, " because, though he actually did not know it before, the garden happened to be his own."

THE END

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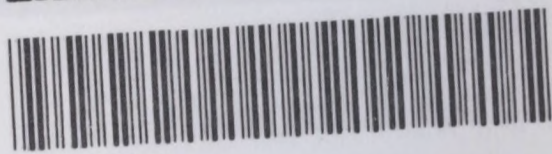
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